

**Making a Life**

by

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the Thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the Thesis.

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## **Abstract**

The challenges that Australian young people face as they go about 'making a life' are amplified for those who grow up in rural places. This is due to the specific nature of employment opportunities, educational provision, available public transport and community expectations pertaining to life in the country. The aim of this thesis is to explore the social processes involved as young people in a small rural community negotiate a series of life transitions – from school to work, from local settlement to residency elsewhere, from youth to adulthood, and so on. Issues of class and gender are examined from the point of view of socio-economic resources, family interactions, social networks and cultural milieux.

Focussing upon the 'lived experience' of young people, as told through stories and as indicated in diverse trajectories, this thesis follows 32 young people 'making a life' in Geeveston, a small rural town in Southern Tasmania. This is a qualitative, longitudinal research project that spans the time from early high school to post-high school options and issues for the subject group. Data was collected through focussed interviews (1995, 1997, and 1999), observations, and essays.

In theoretical terms, individual stories and intra-group comparisons highlight issues relating to human agency and social structure. That is, the study demonstrates the ways in which the activities of, and choices made by particular individuals are expressions of the societal resources (material, symbolic and cultural) available to them. It explores the ways in which wider social structures (eg., class and gender) are implicated in the allocation of these resources.

Young people's lives are enmeshed within the lives of their families and communities. When respondents are asked about their futures, they tell rich stories about 'past, present, future and me'. Their stories reveal the different geographical, social and symbolic worlds (worlds of meaning) in which they live. Their accounts

differ most across two axis: whether they are set in 'global' or 'local' worlds; and whether stories are 'clear' or 'unclear' (fragmented). On the basis of these differences, four ideal-types of cultural orientation emerge: 'exploring', 'settling', 'wandering' and 'retreating'. These orientations clearly reflect issues of individual and group history, and particularly, very specific class and gender experiences.

The typology, developed from early interviews, is central to subsequent data collection and analysis. Re-interviews show how practices of 'story-ing' are central to lived experience, to individuals' ability to negotiate and to engage in the settings in which they find themselves. The lived experiences of those who have found institutional support for major life-projects contrast to those who are 'hassled', hemmed-in, are frustrated or 'doing-time'.

As they make lives and make sense of it all, respondents are being creative but with very different resources. Their stories function as catalogues of 'resources-at-hand', or the different resources that they are accessing. Resources vary in type: practical (eg. food, shelter, health care, work), symbolic (eg. language, conceptual frames, stocks of knowledge) and resources of habit and practice (eg. abstraction, reflexivity). Different layers of resources overlay and interplay, shaping individuals' situations, and multiplying differences in life-chances.

Finally, the thesis explores social processes by which these different types of resources become available to respondents. In *all* cases, resource flows depend upon relationships of trust (with individuals, groups, and/or institutions), that in turn depend upon individual and group history. Again, local issues, and gender and class issues are vital. The implications of the findings for research, policy and practice are discussed.



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## 1. Introduction

Near the end of the road south, at the southern tip of Tasmania, an island state (itself at the southern tip of Australia), lies a small rural town called Geeveston. This, the most beautiful place in the world, is also a place of considerable pain. It is in one of the areas where the costs of wider social changes are being acutely felt. Social changes are most clearly embodied in the challenges that the town's young people face as they grow up, and in the anger and frustration of some of their parents at everything that stands in their way.

For some, this local life is clearly a life of abundance, *enhanced by* rurality, physical surrounds, and the bonds of community. Meanwhile, for others, day-to-day life seems far better characterized as a struggle, and the *burden is seemingly increased by* the same rurality, physical surrounds, and bonds of community. As an outsider to the community, I found that what began as my concern for the kids often turned into admiration and wonder at them and their families for their strength of conviction, resilience of spirit, and creativity of solutions. Yet there were many for whom solutions to issues of livelihood, meaning, and social connectedness clearly were a long way off.

I was a youthworker in the Huon Valley, which encompasses Geeveston (pronounced 'Jeevston'), from 1991-1994. I withdrew from that role to do some thinking and some listening. This thesis is the result. My questions were many and varied:

- Why do apples swing unpicked on the trees while Ben has no job?
- What is happening to this town that makes some people so angry?
- Why is life here so abundant for some and so tough for others?
- How is it that some kids can make very contented and connected lives here, while the lives of others are so characterized by frustration and withdrawal?
- Why will some young people happily leave town to seek opportunities elsewhere while others have no intention of doing this?
- (and stemming from my own role-struggle) What could a community worker or youthworker most usefully do here? What would it look like?

There were some different questions lying beneath these:

- What is going on here?
- How could we know what is going on?
- How to make sense of it all - how to find and tell a story (or multiple stories) that do some justice to these lives, issues and struggles?

Most of these questions can be encapsulated into a single research question: Why and how are Geeveston's young people so differently 'making a life'? I am defining making a life in terms of livelihood, meaning, and social connectedness. I have framed this question quite broadly because, in empirical research, young people's lives often get fragmented into problems or issues that are studied discretely. Broad questions about 'making a life' also echo some quite familiar sociological questions about social process: about the relationship between individuals and the societies in which they live; about how social differences and social inequalities become embodied in individuals' lives and choices; about transitions in young people's lives and how they are being differently experienced and negotiated.

The other questions (at the top of this page) are really about methodology. This study has been about 'living the questions', and the thesis is a thematic gathering of the many stories that have made sense along the way. As an interpretive study, it draws heavily upon the understandings of respondents, in this case Geeveston's young people. I also make use of other stories from within the sociological discipline, of bodies of social research, of material that helps to place these young people's lives within a social context. I draw upon the languages and concepts of sociological theory often – where they help to make sense of things heard and seen in the field. In return, through grounded research, respondents' lives and stories have potential to expand the scope of sociological research, and further inform our conceptual understandings and our theories.

This was a longitudinal study of the lives and stories of 32 of Geeveston's young people. Findings are a product of the relationships formed with young people and their families over years. Formally, data was gathered through essays, observations and mostly through focussed interviews with young people, although I also

interviewed others to get a clearer picture of social context and process. Young people were interviewed and re-interviewed over the period from early high school to post-high school options (approximate age 12-17).

In terms of the sociological themes, this study is essentially a look at young people in transition - many transitions - changing status, identities, passions, relationships, family structures, possibilities, geographical locations and living arrangements. Within the literature about youth, school-to-work has been privileged as *the* transition of interest. Meanwhile, lived experience tells us that young people's lives are more complex and interesting than this. Other parts of their lives are also integral to understanding their work patterns and opportunities. Through the thesis I will explore some ways of writing more holistic accounts about young people's changing lives.

Equally significantly, this is a study about youth agency and social structure.

Although many studies give information about the larger picture - the structural context in which young people grow up - there is much less research done on how young people themselves are creatively making their own lives within that picture. This is one such study, based upon insiders' stories of lived experience.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore issues of growing up in rural communities. In this early part of the thesis I will review the research that explains some of the reasons why young people in rural areas are having such a rough time. Young people's lives are deeply enmeshed in the issues of their communities, and so the focus needs to be on the changes that are affecting rural communities themselves. Then I will explain some more about Geeveston, the setting for this study, and outline the research that took place.

An interpretive framework for understanding the findings of this research will be introduced in chapter 4. Rather than being generated from theory, the model that I will present arose out of early conversations with respondents. This chapter also looks at the significance of individuals' different stories and practices of 'storying'. These are both reflections of their past (ie. their history and context) and powerful shapers of future possibilities.

Later interviews surround the time of respondents' transitions from Geeveston District High School to elsewhere. Chapters 5 and 6 are processual accounts of the things that happen for different young people at this time, and how they are engaging, negotiating, and making sense of it all. These are cohort case-studies of particular moments: chapter 5 as individuals plan to leave, and then leave, grade 10; and chapter 6 as we find them nearly 2 years later.

Chapters 7 and 8 look at some of the most clearly emerging issues in the ways in which these young people are making, and able to make, their lives. Issues of resources and how young people differently access resources are paramount. These chapters have a focus well beyond school-to-work transitions. Based upon respondents' stories, they present broad, processual accounts of how and why these individuals are making lives, and able to make lives, so differently.

As a whole, the thesis explores social processes by which different types of resources become available to respondents. Individuals' networks are heavily implicated. The thesis shows how, in *all* cases, resource flows depend upon relationships of trust (with individuals, groups, and/or institutions), that in turn depend upon individual and group history. As will be demonstrated, local issues, gender issues and class issues are vital to these patterns. The implications of the findings for research, policy and practice will be discussed in chapter 9. This final chapter also takes a long, hard and reflexive look at the research process itself.



## **2. Growing up in rural Australia**

Young people growing up in Australia around the turn of the twenty-first century are making lives amidst major structural changes in their society. The literature shows how technologies, rationalizations and global markets have led to radical changes in the labour market and the nature of work (eg. see Burgess and Campbell 1998), the loss of the youth job market (Polk and White 1999), and the disappearance of traditional 'stepping stones' into work (Dussledorp Skills Forum 1998). Lack of jobs and increased expectations of schooling have meant prolonged transitions to adulthood, a status traditionally linked to independence, getting a house, and family formation (Dwyer et al. 1999). To this end, this generation of young people are far less able to rely on established pathways and structures than their parents had been. Adult status is effectively being denied to many (Wyn and White 2000). As young people's transitions lengthen and fundamentally change in nature, this generation faces new challenges in terms of forming livelihoods, identities and meaning (Dwyer et al. 1999).

At the same time as these market-driven changes, in a political climate of economic rationalism we are witnessing a 'winding back' of the public sector – of state resources (Wyn and White 1997). Particularly in the area of welfare this means the removal of traditional 'safety nets' for those who could not find a place within the labour market. This accompanies the rationalization of services, for example in public education and health, from resources more freely available to user-pays systems, making them far less available for those with lesser means. These changes are happening across the board but affecting communities and individuals very differently on the basis of long-standing social inequalities (eg. class, gender, race) (Wyn and White 1997). Also, although all of Australia is being affected by the changes, problems are being exacerbated by distance and issues of access to resources.

In this chapter I will explore the impacts of these things *vis a vis* growing up in rural Australian communities. As young people's issues are firmly embedded within the issues of their communities (Quixley 1992), particular attention will also be paid to the changes undergoing rural communities themselves. Firstly I will explore the

implications of growing up in different social worlds – particularly in relation to size of community and geographical isolation. Then I will draw upon research surrounding the changing conditions in rural Australia, and highlight the impacts of these on rural communities and their young people. In the context of making a life, one central issue for young people is about staying or leaving their communities and I will flesh-out some of the implications of this dilemma. Young people have different experiences of growing up in a rural place, and the chapter concludes with some reflections of how social differences – particularly class, gender and race - can impact on individual lives.

### **Living in rural communities**

Rural young people are making their lives within social contexts that are often far removed from those of their urban peers. Both the lived experiences of growing up, and associated individual life-chances can be quite different (White 1999). Size of community and distance bring issues of *access to resources* into sharp relief. Social and geographical location determines which opportunities are physically available to individuals, whilst cultural location shapes how these opportunities can be perceived and made useful. All of these things are mediated to individuals via their own communities, and have huge implications for the ways in which individuals' meaning systems and trajectories are constructed.

As mentioned earlier, communities across Australia are facing newer conditions of increasing structural unemployment, and at the same time the winding back of the public sector removes other familiar safety nets (Wyn and White 1997). Although these things are felt as increased challenges across the board, they are felt nowhere more acutely than in rural Australia. *People who, because of isolation, are dependent on local infrastructures suffer most when those things disappear.* As part of this, for rural young people, the differences between options for their own futures are amplified in a way that they are not for urban school-leavers.

We are talking about significant numbers of Australian young people. Despite a national tendency to cluster around cities and on seaboard, approximately one quarter of the Nation's young people (eg. aged 15-25) live in rural areas (Wyn et al. 1998). From this, however, we can not assume a commonality of experience; rural

communities are diverse (Wyn et al. 1998; White 1999). Each setting is shaped differently by physical geography and regional differences (Wyn et al. 1998), as well as settlement histories, indigenous relationships to the land, industrial development, sustainable production patterns and world markets (White 1999).

Other authors have already commented about the problematic nature of 'rurality' as a concept (Looker and Dwyer 1997; Hogg and Carrington 1998). In Australia, depending upon the focus of writers, rurality has been defined on the basis of different criteria, for example: demographic or social (population-based) upon geographical criteria (distance) or a combination of the two (eg. see Hillier et al. 1996). Within the ranks of those who agree about criteria, there still are further differences: while Quixley (1992) includes population centres of 200 and 5000 people, Dunne et al (1993) define rural as a town with a population under 25 000. For the purposes of this study, further exploring typologies of rurality and remoteness would be less than helpful. As Looker and Dwyer (1997) point out, rurality means different things in different social contexts. Smaller centres can be proximate to other larger centres, and distance may not as fixed as it appears (eg. new highways, electronic communications). In their discussion of rurality, they point instead to other social characteristics: separateness and distinctness; patterns of relationships; concentration of social connections; fewer external connections or greater 'closure'. Each of these things will be the result of *different* combinations of size and distance. Following Wyn et. al. (1998) I see it as important to embrace stories from both small towns and regional centres within a definition of rurality, if for no other reason, because of the common impact of the decline in rural economies on young people's lives. Consequently I will also make use of the 'broad' definition of rurality offered by Barker and Milligan (1990) and Wyn et. al. (1998:6), referring to 'all areas outside of capital cities and major urban conglomerates'.

### *Different social worlds*

Rural young people live in different social worlds to their urban counterparts. Through distance and economies of scale they experience restricted access to certain services and resources. However 'size and distance are mechanical shorthand for more profound social differences' (Looker and Dwyer 1997:9). Through local community life, young people may have access to a whole range of other things that

urban people cannot hope to understand. Now, however, broader social and economic changes - and particularly rationalizations in the public and private sectors - mean that many communities and their young are experiencing the loss of access to certain key things that they did have. Through changes in the ways in which rural communities themselves are resourced, they are losing their traditional ways of creating and sustaining infrastructures within which their young can make a life.

The lived experience of rurality varies with time, between communities, between families and between individuals. For some, growing up and living in a rural community represents a positive, viable experience. For others, it involves considerable struggle (Wyn et al. 1998). Issues of class, gender and race are very significant, and will be examined later. First, though some common themes will be explored.

The strengths and abundances of rural communities are not well captured by statistics and indicators. They are often intangible but can be steeped in meaning. Amongst both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities, individual lives may be strongly anchored to people or to place (Brady 1991; Wyn et al. 1998). Patterns of practice often incorporate valued understandings that are shared across generations (Wyn et al. 1998). Meaning systems can be structured around events, seasons and traditions in a way that can not be appreciated by outsiders.

Themes that emerge strongly from Australian community studies show pride in the place, in the type of relationships that exist, and in the qualities of the people. Many people in rural places say that they appreciate fresh air (see Wild 1978; Dempsey 1990) and scenery (Wild 1978) open spaces, lack of congestion, peacefulness, security from violent crime, and opportunities for recreational activities (Dempsey 1990). These themes are mirrored in some of the youth literature; rural young people have reported that they appreciate fresh air (Hillier et al. 1996), clean, open spaces, being able to walk the streets safely (Tasmanian Department for Community Development 1998; see also 18-year-old authors Figuerra and Nagle in 'Heywire' - the ABC's rural youth web page, 1998) and distance from the problems of the city (Hillier et al. 1996).

Rural communities, almost by definition, have strong cultural identity (Quixley 1992). Regarding the qualities of the people, young people may share communities' stories of what is good and honourable. Identities are built and maintained within these understandings (eg. see Irvine 1999).

Attachments to communities may revolve around themes of continuity and belonging (eg. see Dempsey 1990). For example, when talking about their town, 'Smalltown' inhabitants invoke 'Gemeinschaft' qualities. These can be described in the following way:

...intimate, enduring, and based on a clear understanding of where each person stands in society... There will be a community sentiment involving close and enduring loyalties to the place and the people... in a community everyone is known and can be placed in the social structure. This results in a personalizing of issues, events and explanations, because familiar names and characters inevitably become associated with everything that happens. (Bell and Newby 1971:24)

Not surprisingly, these findings are also mirrored by different research with rural youth. Young respondents have reported that they appreciate the quality of relationships (Wyn et al. 1998), levels of familiarity (Wyn et al. 1998; Looker and Dwyer 1997; Hillier et al. 1996), in some cases predictability was also appreciated (Looker and Dwyer 1997), and also a sense of belonging (Wyn et al. 1998; see also Figuererra and Nagle 1998 in 'Heywire' 1998). Families tend to play a strong role in young people's lives and are usually seen as very important (Bourke 1997). Rural young people are more likely than urban counterparts to have long-standing family ties to their communities (Looker and Dwyer 1997). Some report that sport is a source of solidarity between generations (Wyn et al. 1998). Significantly, also, young people in one national study reported that close knit communities mean not just a greater capacity for emotional support, but also for physical support 'the basics, food, wood and roof' (Quixley 1992:20).

However, the flip-side of open space is distance, and the flip-side of close relationships is that non-conformity may lead to criticism, rejection (Dempsey 1990) and being stigmatized (Wyn et al. 1998):

The very qualities that are a positive feature for some are a negative feature for others. Familiarity can seem intrusive, continuity and tradition can appear narrow-minded and institutional forms of recreation can be exclusive. (Wyn et al. 1998:8)

It is common for young people to mention that everybody knows everybody's business (Hillier et al. 1996). Perceptions of gossip can lead to a desire to withdraw from their communities and in small towns this leaves few alternatives for social contact (Tasmanian Department for Community Development 1998). Wyn et al. (1998) point out a very significant irony: that a common issue for rural young people, even from within 'close knit' communities is the feeling of isolation.

#### *Economies of scale and tyrannies of distance*

One study suggests that rural young people see cities as a place of 'more'. More 'crime, more violence, more noise, more pollution', but also 'more jobs, more opportunities, more shops and more options' (Looker and Dwyer 1997:20; see also 15 year-old Freeman, 1998 in 'Heywire'). Rural young people also say that they experience lack of access to many things. Underlying most issues of access are two key factors: physical isolation from other larger settlements (see Epps and Sorensen 1996), and size of community.

Size of community underwrites the development of local infrastructures, including those from both private and public sectors. Population determines, for example, the kinds of small businesses that can grow and be sustainable, and therefore work, and therefore the numbers of families that can be supported and stay in town.

Government expenditure is also a significant factor (White 1999). In less densely settled areas, real costs per capita rise when providing services, for example education and health, electricity, phones, or sealed roads (Epps and Sorensen 1996).

Meanwhile, distance from other centres restricts access to external services, facilities, and infrastructures such as employment, health, and education. This is true particularly in inland rural areas (Epps and Sorensen 1996). This is also very

significant. It leaves people in rural and remote areas far more dependent than others upon their localized infrastructures.

### *Issues of access to resources*

The key thing that makes rural communities different from urban sub-communities is access to resources (Looker and Dwyer 1997). People in rural and remote locations cannot access many things that are taken for granted in larger centres (White 1999). Some of these impact on quality of life now, others impact on future life chances. Research to date suggests that particularly salient issues for young people include access to entertainment, jobs, finance, education, health, and transport.

Young people frequently report that rural areas have limited recreational, leisure, and entertainment facilities (White 1999). The issue of living in rural areas is met with some ambivalence; while many like living where they do, many perceive that there is 'nothing to do' (Bourke 1997). On the ABCs web page 'Heywire' the themes most consistently raised by the young rural authors include a lack of opportunities for interaction with people of their own age, of chances to meet new people who did not know everything about them, and of the need at times for something exciting and unpredictable to happen. The inadequate term 'entertainment' which keeps emerging in the literature actually reflects their social isolation; many young people feel that their needs and interests are not catered for within their communities (Wyn et al. 1998).

On a more tangible note, rurality means poor job prospects (Tasmanian Department for Community Development 1998; Wyn et al. 1998), with unemployment rates nearly twice as high for rural as for urban young people (White 1999). Rural students also experience a shortage of accessible part-time jobs (Looker and Dwyer 1997).

On average, rural people have lower incomes than other Australians (HREOC 1999) and poverty levels are higher in rural than in urban areas (Cooney 1998). While locally, material disadvantage can be compensated by local barter and cashless economies, when individuals need to engage with different social groups, however, these systems may prove less transferable than cash.

Rural young people experience poor access to education and training (Quixley 1992; Tasmanian Department for Community Development 1998), and extensive barriers to participation (eg. see Dwyer et al. 1997). This is not to say that schools in rural areas provide education of a poorer quality – good and bad schools can be found in rural and metropolitan areas – but that quality local educational programs can also be bound up in, and constrained by issues of access (Stokes et al. 1999). In order to respond to the particular needs of communities, teachers in rural areas have developed alternative and innovative forms of education (Wyn and Stokes 1998). However, the equation of ‘rural’ and ‘disadvantaged’ has been a basis for much of the social, education and economic policy development in Australia (Stokes et al. 1999).

In many cases students are involved with larger educational systems that are designed with urban students in mind (Stokes et al. 1999). Distance education is suitable for primary aged students (although it places a strain on parents) but is a poor second option to an interactive high school (HREOC 1999). Although new technologies (eg. internet) promise much, one recent study found an inverse relationship between remoteness and the use of new communication technologies – largely because of the associated costs (Stokes et al. 1999). Aboriginal young people are less likely to access the limited options available (Quixley 1992) and raise issues of cultural appropriateness, relevance, and language (Stokes et al. 1999). Combining school and work is more difficult for rural students (Looker and Dwyer 1997). Rural students are also more likely to be affected by material disadvantage than others (Choate et al. 1992) and the costs associated with distance education / school of the air, boarding, setting up two houses, transport, curriculum enrichment and technology are issues for many families (Stokes et al. 1999). This inhibits retention; up to one third of respondents in one study reported that material disadvantage shaped choices (Abbott-Chapman et al. 1992).

In terms of higher education, the costs associated with higher education significantly affects students in rural and remote areas (Stokes et al. 1999). The role of government policies is complex: even whilst unemployment payments are (in theory) restructured to promote continued education for all students, changes to fees, student loans, Austudy and means tests have systematically ruled many rural young people



out of the picture. A lack of immediate access to further and higher educational facilities also limits the amount of information available to country students, who may have to rely on impersonal written documents when making choices about futures. These may not be specific enough for their requirements (Cunningham et al. 1992).

A recent publication (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2000) reveals that as the distance from metropolitan centres increases, so do mortality and illness levels. Despite this, rural people experience a widespread inadequacy of health services (HREOC 1999). This has been *the key issue* raised in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's current series of 'Bush Talks' around rural Australia. The commission heard that supply of primary care practitioners per head of population falls sharply in rural areas (HREOC 1999), as does the amount of spending per hospital bed (National Farmers' Federation 1997). Restricted numbers of doctors and specialist services are only one part of the problem. Participants expressed concern at: long waits for appointments with doctors (eg. days, weeks); lack of dental options; places where no doctor in town would bulk bill; the paucity of mental health services, appropriate drug and alcohol services, counselling and psychiatric care, and especially services suitable for young people (HREOC 1999).

Australian research with young people suggests that health services are being avoided by young people due to expectations of a lack of confidentiality or unfair treatment. Also, in some instances young people are unaware that services are available (Wyn et al. 1998). Meanwhile health services for Aboriginal Australians are often rendered less useful by ignorance of cultures, high staff turnover (HREOC 1999), inappropriate modes of delivery (Quixley 1992; HREOC 1999) mistrust, or fear (Wyn et al. 1998).

Insufficient transport to facilities in nearby centres adds to rural isolation (Green and McDonald 1996; Wyn et al. 1998). In one study, 84% of people under 18 were driven to local centres by their parents, further contributing to challenges for those who have parents who were less supportive of their needs (Hillier et al. 1996). Public transport, if available at all, can be very costly; return bus trips to nearby centres often cost \$10, and in one reported case was as much as \$80 (Quixley 1992).

Other issues that limit young people's easy access of public transport include routes, safety, and shelter (Green and McDonald 1996).

### **Changing conditions in rural Australia**

A thorough analysis would have to look at the impacts of change on mining, pastoral and fishing communities, and also the impact of tourism. The focus here will remain with agricultural communities for two reasons. Firstly – these are the issues in most of the 'rural' literature, and secondly, Geeveston, the geographical setting for this study itself has an agricultural background.

Far-reaching and rapid changes to rural communities are being brought about by technological change, environmental issues, international affairs, private and corporate actions, as well as broader cultural, demographic and lifestyle shifts (Epps and Sorensen 1996). Most profoundly affecting all areas of Australia, though, are the effects of changed economic conditions within labour and industry, structural unemployment, and the winding back of the public sector (Wyn and White 1997). Even though the same processes are happening across the board in Australia, perhaps no-where are the changes to social infrastructure more pronounced than in rural communities.

Shifts in government policy, and in particular in trade and industrial development policy, have a dramatic effect on community life and resources in country areas (Quixley 1992; White 1999). The globalization of Australian agricultural markets has increased some trade opportunities, but there also have been costs in the equation. These costs have been felt first by rural commodity producers:

Despite suggestions that wheat producers may be doing well or that prices for wool are improving, or that there is increasing demand for fresh vegetables in the Asia-Pacific, there are serious and unrelenting pressures upon Australia's agricultural industries: the prices paid by farmers for the inputs to agriculture are increasing at a faster rate than the prices which overseas and domestic consumers are prepared to pay for the products of agriculture. (Lawrence 1996:332)

A shift from interventionist policy to market rationalism has been felt across Australia, but most profoundly in regional areas (Economou 2001). With deregulation and opening-up of markets has come the closing down of small business. Increasing scale economies in the farm sector herald the weakening of traditional rural enterprises. This accompanies a government reluctance to step in to support agricultural practices (Epps and Sorensen 1996), where rural operators are stating that this is appropriate, necessary, and even urgent.

Meanwhile, rationalization of both government and privatized services, prevalent across Australia, has been even more pronounced in rural areas. Policies that focus on economies of scale have led to the removal of many services from rural communities (Cunningham et al. 1992; Wyn et al. 1998). Whether organizations retreat for profit motive or to maximize service in other areas (Epps and Sorensen 1996), the impact is the same: priorities clash with the immediate interests of rural communities and their people. The result has been reductions in infrastructure and service delivery in everything from banks to hospital care (Epps and Sorensen 1996).

As people in rural communities are more dependent than others upon their small, local infrastructures, when these things are removed in accordance with broader social and economic patterns, it is they who suffer most. They are dependent upon things local, but it is these very local things that have historically been (in the case of Aboriginal Australians) and are currently being (in the case of post-WW-2 primary industry settlements) undermined. As these changes combine to affect whole communities, they dramatically colour both the life-chances, and the lived experience of making a life, for rural young people.

### **The impacts of change on rural communities and their young people**

These broad patterns impact firstly on whole communities, and secondly on individual life-chances. As towns lose key services and critical subsidies, cyclic, or spiralling patterns are set up in both community life and individual trajectories. Links to the outside world may remain distant and tenuous, but at the same time, self-sufficiency is dealt a hefty blow. As communities lose their own resource bases, they lose the ability to both provide for their young, and to protect them from external conditions.

The 'Bush Talks' (HREOC 1999) document how keenly people of all ages in rural communities are aware of these effects. From all over Australia, both speakers at community forums and written submissions articulate rural people's 'deep concern' about lack of opportunities for their young (1999:20).

Communities' diminished ability to provide for their young is manifest in many ways. It is most evident in the loss of the infrastructures that sustain day-to-day life. Continued rationalizations and closures mean that young people have to go further to get access to services like schools, hospitals and railways (Green and McDonald 1996).

The infrastructures for building futures are also disappearing. Many traditional 'pathways' to employment no longer exist (Looker and Dwyer 1997). As traditional enterprises collapse and services are lost, there is less employment available (Epps and Sorensen 1996). 'Rural decline' also entails the loss of other viable roles - ways of engaging and contributing to the community. In this way lifestyle changes affect the young as much as the old.

These changes mean that young people lose ways of viably staying in their communities. In Quixley's national research (1992:16) she found that young people's questions about continued viable rural living very often came back to the larger question 'what is the future of this community?'.

Unemployment is both cause and effect of the withdrawal of services from rural Australia (HREOC 1999). Many people from rural communities leave, most notably, the young, usually to seek work (Wyn et al. 1998), education (HREOC 1999; Looker and Dwyer 1997) or increased future options (Looker and Dwyer 1997). Declines in population are then matched by further declines in services (Lawrence 1996; Cooney 1998). This places greater strains on the provision of support services for those who remain (Wyn et al. 1998). So the cycle is perpetuated; when the greengrocer's shop closes, this means one less job, and one less family that can continue to live in the town (Quixley 1992). It is in this way that unemployment 'contributes directly to the destruction of rural communities' (Wyn et al. 1998:14).

Few people are keen to purchase property in declining communities (Lawrence 1996), although economic hardship propels some families further out of cities to where housing is cheaper. Decreased services are linked by one report to negative health effects (National Farmers' Federation 1997). Rural populations are also aging rapidly (HREOC 1999). Ironically, those who stay in rural communities, for example the aged and the economically disadvantaged, can often be the very groups who most need social services, welfare and health support (Lawrence 1996). Those who seek to change things find they have reduced political leverage, (Epps and Sorensen 1996), just at the time they need it most. In the 'Bush Talks' report, The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission frame their findings bluntly:

Many communities in rural Australia are under siege. They have declining populations, declining incomes, declining services and a declining quality of life. The infrastructure and community of many rural, regional and remote towns have been slowly pared away'.  
(HREOC 1999:14)

With regard to service provision 'a pseudo-Darwinian process' is taking place where some towns emerge as survivors, better able to win in the struggle for expansion (Epps and Sorensen 1996:156). Regional centres grow, but smaller towns fade. While the 'tyranny of distance' has in some ways been eroded by substantial developments in communication technology, rural Australia is, in other senses, moving further away. In particular, the contrast between inland rural and larger coastal centres has steadily increased (Epps and Sorensen 1996).

#### *Protection of the young*

The changes mean that the role of communities in protecting their young is also being undermined. The depletion in support services and the changing demographics in rural areas mean that families and their young fall through both formal and informal safety nets:

If family support services are thin on the ground in major centres, they may be practically non-existent in rural parts of Australia. While local community support networks still exist in rural and remote communities, the changing social and economic circumstances in these communities no longer provides the safety net it once did for people when they are in crisis. (Morris 1995).

The security that comes from a close-knit community is diminished, with unrelated newcomers moving in for economic reasons, (lesser known and with less resources) while the young and the upwardly mobile (the community's future) are moving out (eg. see Dempsey 1990). The image of haemorrhaging has been used to describe this pattern.

Regarding young people's futures, even the expertise and guidance of previous generations is undermined. For both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities, this means the erosion of inter-generational links to ways of living with each other and with place (see Quixley 1992; Wyn et al. 1998). As systems change and local options diminish, the young require more education outside their communities, in systems with which their local elders and experts are not familiar.

### *Cultural ways of life undermined*

We have talked about social infrastructures, but communities also provide cultural infrastructures for making a life. These include ways of making sense of lived experience, expectations, shared understandings of who we are, what we are doing, and why this is important.

Alongside the onslaughts on infrastructure, rural communities find themselves undergoing a process of 'detraditionalisation'. Traditions, though, are intertwined with interests and with identities (Gray and Phillips 1996). People's health, in a wholistic sense involves engagement in communities (Quixley 1992; Wyn et al. 1998). Changes threaten not just livelihoods but people's shared ways of life. Whilst aboriginal Australians have been experiencing attacks on tradition for several generations, for many more Australians these are only coming into focus in this generation.

Along with social changes, the ideology of rural-ness is being undermined. Australian community studies describe a culture of 'countrymindendness' in that occupiers of certain rural towns define themselves in opposition to the city (Dempsey 1990; Gray 1991). They produce the essentials of life, which city people rely on themselves or for export (Gray 1991). It is a notion of 'the bush' struggling with these problems, and without sufficient reward, that has been a catalyst for recent strain and tension, voter backlash, and the rise of new political forces like One Nation (Economou 2001).

At the same time images of the bright lights in the city provide the young with alternative images of desirable lifestyles, and these remain quite disconnected from realistic understandings of options and their respective costs (Quixley 1992). Improvements in communications and technology serve to only remind rural young people of the urban things in which they are missing out (Wyn et al. 1998).

#### *Indicators of social problems*

One of the most dramatic indicators of social stress is rural youth suicide. The number of deaths in Australia attributed to suicide rose from 2,197 in 1988 to 2,723 in 1997, an increase of 24% over the 10 year period (ABS 2000b). Rural rates (17 per 100 000) are higher than capital cities (13) and other urban areas (15) (ABS 2000a) and substantially higher for young men than young women (ABS 2000b). In 1986 the rural male (age 15-24) suicide rate (per 100 000) was 24, and in 1995 it had risen to 34 (ABS 1997d:38). Indigenous youth suicide rates are also 1.4% times the non-indigenous rate (Department of Health and Family Services 1997:3). One comparison of metropolitan and rural trends in youth suicide (Dudley et al. 1998) revealed that while suicide rates for 15-24 year old Australian young men have doubled since the 1960s, they have increased by as much as twelve-fold in some (not all) towns with fewer than 4000 people.

Rurality means poor job prospects (Tasmanian Department for Community Development 1998; Wyn et al. 1998), with nearly twice as many rural compared to urban young people likely to report unemployment (Looker and Dwyer 1997). Amongst Aboriginal communities unemployment rates can be as high as 95%

(Human Services and Health 1994). Rural youth move in and out of employment more often than urban youth (Looker and Dwyer 1997). Seasonal work is common and often does not provide adequate income for independent living (Quixley 1992). In areas where seasonal work is prevalent, these patterns mask unemployment (Wyn et al. 1998).

Rural students do not stay at school as long as urban youth (Looker and Dwyer 1997). This is manifest in several ways. Firstly, rural young people are less likely to complete compulsory education (to year 10) (HREOC 1999) and in some areas significant numbers of rural students are still leaving school before the age of 15 (Wyn et al. 1998). Secondly, rurality hinders education past the compulsory mark (Cunningham et al. 1992). When compared to those in metropolitan areas, lower levels of young people complete year 12 in rural regions. The average year 12 retention rate for boys in rural and remote areas is only 54%, as compared to 63% in capital cities, and for girls it is 66% as compared to 74% in capital cities (Sidoti 2001). Non-completion is a significant issue; Australian students who did not complete year 12 in the mid-1990s experienced longer periods of unemployment (Lamb et al. 2000). Thirdly, more rural than urban youth take alternative, non-tertiary paths (Looker and Dwyer 1997). When compared to a decade ago, fewer rural young people are entering tertiary education (25% in 1989, 16% in 1997 (HREOC 1999:13).

These patterns are not new, and low retention rates can be traced back to traditional rural pathways and expectations. The attitude of 'no jobs, why bother' often prevails (Quixley 1992:42). One study (Stokes et al. 1999) recently found significant numbers of students only aspiring to attend school until the end of year 10 (these figures were highest for Tasmania).

### **Issues of staying and leaving**

In the light of the issues above, choices about whether or not to continue education can become problematic (Cunningham et al. 1992) or at least complicated (Looker and Dwyer 1997). One piece of research with rural young people (Bourke 1997) reveals that many more plan on completing year 12 than actually do. In high school,



most are not sure of their future plans, and this is to be expected. It becomes problematic though, when options are cut off in ways that may be regretted in later life (Bourke 1997).

Decisions about whether to continue education are not made in isolation but in the context of many other social factors. Rural / urban research in Australia and Canada demonstrates that transition paths are 'qualitatively different' from those of urban and suburban youth. Unlike urban situations, choice is highlighted in rural areas and often entails either severing ties or missing valuable opportunities (Looker and Dwyer 1997):

Regardless of whether the move to city is seen as oppressive or as an opportunity, it is a move few urban youth have to make to pursue their post-secondary plans. It is a move almost all rural youth have to consider. (Looker and Dwyer 1997:15)

The differences between choices are amplified for rural students. In many cases it can be a trade-off between perceived life-chances, and quality of life or living in ways that are known and valued:

This means that the decision about pursuing post secondary education is a very different one for rural as compared to urban youth. Their educational decisions involve different costs, both financial and social. (Looker and Dwyer 1997:14)

Continuing education may mean being forced to travel long distances or leave home (Quixley 1992). This often involves tangible losses, for example, the costs associated with transportation (Cunningham et al. 1992; Abbott-Chapman et al. 1992) or accommodation (Looker and Dwyer 1997; Cunningham et al. 1992; Abbott-Chapman et al. 1992).

Leaving may also involve the loss of less tangible things. In one national study (Quixley 1992), young people who left their communities reported in hindsight that they were ill prepared, homesick, hated city life, and many also said they believed that their choices had been made without a real understanding of options. A

significant part of the challenge was that moving away involved multiple transitions at once, including: from small town to city; living independently; new school / learning setting; and new cultural setting (Quixley 1992).

In another study (Looker and Dwyer 1997), young people identified that there were far less of the kinds of social ties that they identified from back at home. While some had found home ties suffocating and could not wait to get away, others felt 'lost and isolated' in an urban environment. In moving, the issue is not just adjustment to the changes, but that young people 'cut themselves off from the social support networks that they rely on to help with the multiple transitions to adulthood' (Looker and Dwyer 1997:14). Family and networks are often a major source of support. It is important not to underestimate the significance of proximity to the maintenance of social networks and the strain caused by decisions to leave. Respondents reported that living away from home creates problems for study, because it is hard enough simply to survive (Looker and Dwyer 1997). International research (eg. from Canada) suggests similar themes; young people have to choose between improved prospects elsewhere and the things with which they are familiar. Regardless of whether respondents reported strong attachment to family or local community, plans to settle elsewhere after education were often linked to depression and unhappiness (Elder et al. 1996).

One young Australian writer relates the lived experience of urban chauvinism against himself and other rural students, after moving to continue education. In order to accept and accommodate new experiences and ideas, he explains the felt need to reconstruct identity, beliefs and values (Irvine 1999). This involves hard work, especially when it is done in the absence of familiar supports and sources of identity.

### **Social inequalities in rural communities**

Just as access to services, infrastructures and possibilities differs between communities, it also differs within communities. When making a life out of the limited available opportunities, some rural young people are far better resourced to do so than others. As in all other social settings, there are significant social divisions in country areas (White 1999). These are historically based and structurally reinforced. Some key axes of difference are gender, Aboriginality, and class.

The oppression of women is expressed in many forms, including patterns of domestic labour, paid labour, in exclusion from, and subordination within spheres of leisure activity (Dempsey 1990), and in the more subtle forms and expectations that are carried by specific cultures. Traditional gender roles rule, as the ideology which gives domestic caring responsibilities to women is still strong in rural Australia. With gender stereotyping of options (Quixley 1992; Wyn et al. 1998) young women may discover that they have limited roles both modelled to them and available to them personally. Married women have been, and in some places still are, perceived to be taking the jobs of young women (Williams 1981a; Quixley 1992), and local cultures often encourage little analysis of the systems that would exclude women, or of the interaction of patriarchy and capitalism (Williams 1981a). The phenomena of the 'auxiliary' lives on both formally and informally in rural Australia. This amounts to women's provision of free labour to support the public political world of men (Williams 1981a), their social lives and social causes (Dempsey 1990).

Rural cultures also propagate and sanction certain forms of exaggerated masculinity that are centred around rugged conditions and hard work (Williams 1981a). In these cultural climates, social expectations leave little room for different expressions of masculinity (Hillier et al. 1996). Gay and lesbian rural young people report that they are subjected to intolerance, discrimination, and harassment (HREOC 1999). This has only recently been linked to rural male suicide (Green 1996; Wyn et al. 1998). Cultural patterns associated with working-class masculinity are also linked to poor performance in education. Boys from families with lower socio-economic status are often the most disadvantaged in terms of schooling (Kenway et al. 2000).

In urban Australia, only 1% of the population lays claim to Aboriginality, compared to 2.1% nationally and 20% in remote zones (Strong 1998). Demographic surveys of health and life-expectancy are particularly poignant reminders of differing life-chances between Aboriginal Australians and others of primarily European descent. For example, life expectancy is 20 years lower for Aboriginal Australians than for non-aboriginal Australians (Cooney 1998:11-12). Aboriginal Australians are less likely to live in their own homes, have (on average) smaller dwellings of a rougher standard, and have an increased risk of being exposed to violence (Australian

Institute of Health and Welfare 2000). Only one in three Aboriginal students will complete year 12. This is less than half the rate of other Australian students (Schwab 1999).

Behind the indicators lies a history of dispossession, cultural suppression, and removal from land and family. Original 'oversights' meant that little attention was paid to Aboriginal patterns of land-use. These issues are still sources of ongoing tensions with 'business' farmers (eg. see Voyce 1996). Non-Aboriginal communities still show widespread ignorance of history or declare it to be a non-issue (eg. see Gray 1991; Friend 1992). Assumptions of a level-playing-field mean episodes of backlash about 'special treatment'. Submissions to the 'Bush Talks' also suggest that 'short-sighted' government programs (eg. 'closing schools and building prisons') are acting as significant forces in the perpetuation of indigenous disadvantage (HREOC 1999:25). Regarding capacities to shape policy, there has been a history of Aboriginal estrangement from all levels of post-colonial government, which is only beginning to be addressed (eg. Aboriginal communities only gained the right to elect all their own representatives on ATSIC in 1999).

Beyond the tangible factors relating to Aboriginal life-chances, 'intolerance and discrimination exacerbate consistently poor living conditions' (HREOC 1999:24). Australian research also relates accounts of lived experience of difference (HREOC 1999:12,25), of relationships that stereotype and make Aboriginal people 'other', and socially exclude them within their own towns. These cultural factors further constrain Aboriginal young people's opportunities.

These things are overshadowed, further exaggerated, or compounded by socioeconomic differences. Structured and historically based inequalities are very evident in Australian life, and no less in rural areas. Recent research reveals the impact of class on young people's lives (Wyn and White 2000). For example, it is socioeconomic status, rather than rurality itself that is most important in shaping whether young people go on to higher education (James et al. 1999). Different patterns of accessing health services is a prime example, with people from more socioeconomically disadvantaged areas far more likely to use doctors and outpatient or casualty services, but less likely to access preventative health services (ABS 1999).

Within towns, small town egalitarianism and class differences are forces which work in opposing directions to create complex and contradictory interaction patterns (Dempsey 1990). Differences are revealed in many ways, including patterns of housing (eg. see Williams 1981a), in the education of children (eg. see Dempsey 1990), work habits, and social practices (eg. see Wild 1978). Socioeconomic differences are perpetuated across generations, with a wide range of structural and cultural factors contributing to current patterns.

In rural areas the young people who can access the limited occupational and educational options are also those who have greater reserves of personal or family economic resources (White 1999). Patterns of association serve to reinforce other more formalized distinctions (eg. see Williams 1981a; Wild 1978; Dempsey 1990). For example, employment is found through the formal labour market, but also via family-based social and occupational connections (White 1999).

### **Implications**

In this chapter I have looked at some of the issues pertinent to growing up in rural Australia. As they go about the business of making a life, there are substantial differences in the ways that young people can negotiate the challenges that face them. These things depend upon the availability of certain social resources, which in turn are grounded in social divisions such as Aboriginality, gender, and class. Rurality adds yet one more level of complexity to this picture. The focus of this study involves how this happens amongst one group of young people in one rural community, and chapter 3 will introduce that community.

### **3. Making a life in Geeveston**

There are some common themes that emerge from the literature about growing up in rural Australia. These were reviewed in the previous chapter. Most of these same themes also find a place in locals' stories about living in Geeveston. Having said this, Geeveston is as unique in geographical setting, history, economy, and culture as any other rural Australian town. Just as it is important to get an understanding of the broader social context in which young people construct their lives, an understanding of particular *local* conditions, history and issues will make even more sense of the things that they are doing. Young people's own stories are enmeshed in the stories of their communities. Not only this, but local relationships are powerful in the ways that they mediate individuals' access to social goods, to other relationships, and to social reality. This is particularly relevant in isolated areas where it is the same relationships that mediate *everything*.

This chapter introduces Geeveston, the setting for my research with rural young people. It concludes with an outline of my community-based research methods.

By way of background information, my interest in the area began as a youthworker in The Huon Valley ('The Valley'), which encompasses Geeveston. Significant questions included how and why young people were so differently putting their lives together, why they appeared to be so differently equipped for this process, and how this was happening.

#### **About Geeveston**

The Huon Valley is beautiful. Nestled in the southern tip of Tasmania, The Valley follows the Huon River down to the sea. Apple orchards and European trees line green hills, proclaiming and naming every season. Cut off from the rest of the world by an arc of purple mountains, Geeveston is a landlocked island. The Valley even has its own climate - surreal from above and mysterious from within. A commuter will often drive down through heavy curtains of fog to get there.

For some, Geeveston is the perfect place to live. Seventy-two years ago, 'Old Mr K' came down to do 2 weeks' work, and he is still there: 'Gets to you, this place.' (Fieldnotes, October 1997). 'Sydney-side' commuters and retirees like Beryl and Steve have recently been attracted for the rural lifestyle: 'and it's less than 2 hours from the airport!' (Fieldnotes, May 1999).

The Valley's physical beauty belies some of the social conditions, which can be harsh. The Valley has some real poverty issues (see Just Tasmania Coalition 1999). It is one of the districts of lowest (personal, median) incomes in Tasmania at \$225 per week, and Tasmania is in turn the state with lowest personal median weekly incomes in Australia, at \$257 compared to \$292 nationally [ABS, 1996 #384; (ABS 1997b). Incomes within the town of Geeveston are lower still, at \$160-\$199 per week (ABS 1997a). Unemployment in the Valley is high, as is the receipt of Government benefits (Centrelink 2001).

#### *Distance, culture, identity*

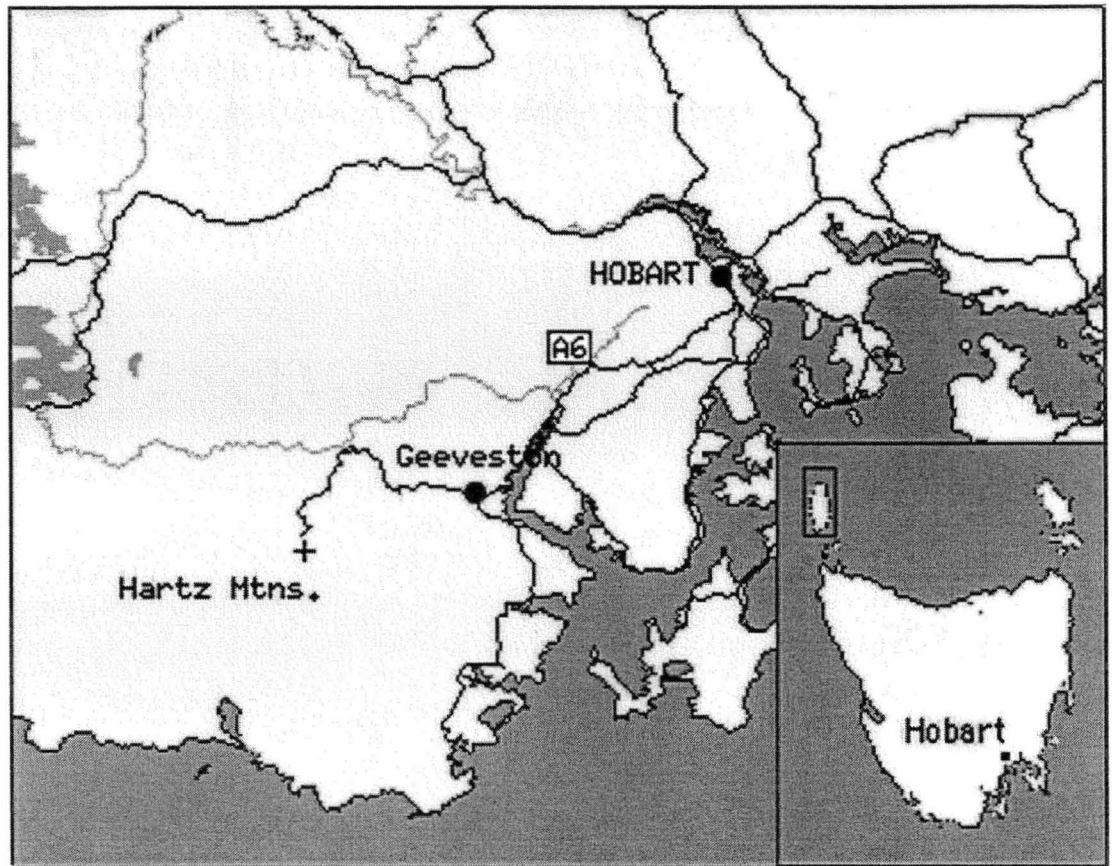
Issues of isolation and distance are central to the challenges that face local young people. On one hand, Geeveston is hardly remote. It is only 66 kilometres from Hobart, the *capital city* of Tasmania, and so most services are available within an hour's drive. On the other hand, with 778 people and 284 houses (ABS 1997a), the town is small, and it *is* a long way out. As much as anything else, the distance is cultural and ideological. Several historical and cultural factors are important here.

Firstly, a history of distance is significant. Before the Huon Highway was opened, trips to Hobart were long. In the 1930s a coach trip to town took 8 hours (Huon and Derwent Times 1936), and symbolically it still does. Wider social changes have been significant in shaping the *meaning* of distance. Most of Geeveston's population have lived there for generations, and ironically as town gets closer by road, it also gets philosophically and politically further away from its city neighbours (and we will return to this issue).

Secondly, there is the issue of Tasmania and distance. On an island only 400 km from bottom to top, and with a population of around 460 000, Tasmanians are not

used to either driving long distances or spending hours in traffic. From a Tasmanian perspective, an hour in a car *is* a long time to travel.

**Figure 1: Geeveston, at the southern tip of Tasmania**



Thirdly, there is the issue of Tasmania's own isolation. The State has a shrinking population (ABS 2001b), high unemployment (ABS 2001a), particularly high in rural areas, and is showing clear signs of its own 'rural decline' (see Nixon 1997; Hugo 1999). Service delivery and 'critical mass' in a small population are issues even for Tasmania's largest cities. Any distance from urban centres exacerbates these issues.

Finally, and related to this, is the town's location near the end of the road south, on the southern tip of the 'Island State', at the bottom of Australia, itself a sparsely populated island continent. For Geeveston, as one of the few towns at the bottom of it all (see figure 1) this has far-reaching implications. A lack of flow-through traffic means a lack of interface with the 'Stranger' (see Simmel 1908; also Schutz 1944), a homogeneity in the expectations and stories that circulate, and a self-contained and



self-referencing local culture. The town is culturally homogenous - census data only records 19 people that are not of Anglo-Saxon / Celtic / Australian heritage (ABS 1997a). In the early 1990s (but less by the end of this study) the 'Strangers', the 'City-folk', the 'Gays', the 'Greenies' who moved into town also moved straight back out. 'We learned quite fast that it was not the place for us.' (Conversation with a 'Greenie', 1992).

### *A proud history, an uncertain future*

The town of Geeveston was settled by Methodists. One result of this is that no pub was ever built within the town boundary (although several clubs now have liquor licenses). This sits in stark contrast to Cygnet, on the other side of the river, where the Catholics settled and there are 3 pubs. Other results of the Methodist heritage include a 'Puritanical streak' (conversation with a local clergy member, 1993). This means firm convictions about personal and public morality, frugality, and a rigid work-ethic. With or without religious adherence, these other cultural qualities have remained strong.

Geeveston's written histories are built upon tales of pioneers, hard work and internationally recognised excellence. History books explain that 'piners' (woodcutters of native timbers, and particularly Huon Pine), were first to settle Geeveston. The Arve Valley, beneath the town, borders the great South-West Wilderness areas where unique and renowned tree species grow. Huon Pine is particularly good for boat building, and Myrtle, Sassafras and Blackwood are craftwoods prized for furniture. These resources meant the growth of a rich timber industry, which at its height employed 1500 men. Also, because of its cool, temperate climate and good soils, The Valley was ideal for fruit-growing. Earlier this century it was 'the richest orcharding district in the Commonwealth' (Huon and Derwent Times 1936). The port was busy, and ship-building boomed.

Since World War II, the rise of global markets, rationalizations of business and government, alongside industrial, technological and labour market changes have unsettled each of these 'boom' areas. Also, in the 1970s, because of competing international markets (African), the apples (primarily golden delicious, which had been sold in British and European markets) also became less viable. In order to keep

people on the land, and redirect their energies, the State government paid a bounty for fruit trees to be ripped out of the ground. When APM, the local pulp mill closed down in 1982, (and closed again after 18 months' operation in 1988), the port also quietened.

Meanwhile, native timber harvesting in Tasmania became economically devalued and very political. The southern forests provide around 60 000 cubic metres of eucalypt veneer log and sawlog per year, and this contributes significantly to Tasmania's economy (Forestry Tasmania 2000). Forestry Tasmania, however, claim that much of the timber from old-growth forests is only suitable for wood-chipping (see Forestry Tasmania 2001). At the same time they pay their tree-fellers per cubic metre / tree (whether it is harvested in a way that makes it suitable for pulp or saw-milling), and it is in contractors' interests to provide volume rather than quality timber. The result of current practices is that between 1.4 and 1.8 million tonnes of hardwood (including old-growth-forests) become pulp and woodchips every year (see Forestry Tasmania 2001). This is a devalued resource that sells for very little. The returns to the local community are now very small. Since the introduction of wood-chipping in the early 1970s there has been an inverse relationship between Tasmanian forests logged, and jobs provided in both logging and downstream processing (Greens 2001).

In a town where primary industry had been the main employer, the latest census (ABS 1997a) records 72 people working in agriculture, forestry, and fishing. This is an improvement on the previous census - at only 40 people (ABS 1994), and correlates with the local growth of the Atlantic Salmon industry. The other significant employers are retail, at 36 persons, and manufacturing at 24. Much of this work is seasonal and casual. A report by the Tasmanian social services peak-body on poverty in The Valley is aptly subtitled: 'All the jobs I've ever worked in have gone' (Just Tasmania Coalition 1999).

These things have happened within the context of a nation of towns undergoing similar changes (see chapter 2). New technologies, rationalizations and globalized world markets have undercut Australian primary industries, and many small towns find themselves in crisis as a result.

### *From the 'centre' to the 'margins'*

Rather than being naturally occurring phenomena, 'rurality' and 'remoteness' are relational concepts. Places are rural compared *to* an other, remote *from* an other. Even size and distance become problematic standards for understanding rurality when small towns make up larger centres or when travel routes are improved (Looker and Dwyer 1997).

Shields (1991) offers a different and more processual conceptualization, suggesting a focus on 'places on the margins'. 'Places on the margins' become 'marginal' in three ways - geographically, economically, and in terms of identity. Geeveston is all three. In fact, most of The Valley's current problems could be traced to its movement from 'central' to 'peripheral' status along each of these three axis. (I will elaborate on this further, but paint a broader picture first). Marginality is the state of being 'left behind' (Shields 1991).

Each of Geeveston's changes has happened in the context of an island state that has been undergoing similar movements - from being central to being marginal in terms of geography, economy and identity within Australia (Lenehan 2000). Tasmania was one of the earlier places in Australia to be colonised, and for a time it was the hub of economic and cultural activity and population growth (Rimmer 1989). It was in fact the little state of Tasmania that settled Victoria (Robson 1997). After dramatic industrial and economic shifts and related population movements in the mid 1800s (Rimmer 1989), Tasmania also finds itself geographically and economically marginal in relation to 'Mainland' Australia. Now Tasmania's identity and its tourism appeal is based almost purely upon promoting itself as being 'other' to mainland Australia - for example through images of rainforest, wilderness, and colonial heritage (Lenehan 2000; see also Morris 1974).

The decades since WWII have seen Geeveston *become* marginal in terms of population and geography. In terms of Australian history, the Huon was also colonised early (1830s) and it fast became both a geographical and economic centre. Markets and populations are now centred elsewhere, and the same social forces (globalization, rationalization) that feed large city centres also starve Geeveston. In 1996, 'Country Bake' (daily bread) left town to centralize operations in Hobart, and

Country bake people like the Wells family left town at the same time. As if symbolically, the apple crumble factory also left town in the late 1990s. Reflecting changes in employment opportunities, Geeveston's population has been slowly shrinking. Where in the previous census it was 829, this census it was 778. In that five years, the age groups 10-14, and 15-19 have shrunk by  $\frac{1}{3}$  and  $\frac{1}{4}$  respectively (ABS 1994; ABS 1997a). Population shrinkage has savage implications for the sustainability of many parts of town life, from small businesses to netball teams.

As shown above, Geeveston's economic marginality is a result of changes in world markets. Forestry Tasmania's old-growth forest logging programs have become increasingly debased in purpose, and absurd in economy, being both unsustainable and heavily subsidised by the State Government (Marsden Jacob Associates 2001). International market competition also continues to make 'doing the apples' a struggle. This industry is contingent upon fickle international markets, and it is still common to see rows of mature and productive trees removed from the ground and burned as new varieties, more fashionable to Asian markets, are planted. Like other rural places, Geeveston has been hit hard by rationalizations of both government services and businesses. When the banks leave town, even faithful local people start shopping in larger centres, with more implications for other businesses.

Identity, too, has become marginal. Whereas for years, 'Tasmania: The Apple Isle' was *named after* the activities of The Valley, the symbolic power of this is now diminished. Equally powerful, with wider public sentiment apparently stacked against them, forest workers feel vilified for 'just trying to do our job'. Ruth, a forest-worker's wife explains how hurt she feels when she listens to talk-back radio: 'I just can't listen to it any more - turn it off.' (Conversation, 1993). As log trucks make their way through Hobart and up to the East Coast with their controversial cargo, they are often hissed at by an urban population that is considerably 'greener' than their rural neighbours.

This, then, is the central conundrum: although Geeveston has a destiny that depends upon its relationship to the outside world, it has an identity that is alien from it. In a town built upon a strong ethos of 'progress', the last few decades have been full of 'undone deals'. Local stories about social change are usually stories of loss and betrayal, of partnerships repeatedly dishonoured by the other. Of paramount

importance is the issue of autonomy – the ‘agency’ of this little community – so much power resides outside the community in wider social structures, in big business and a distant government.

While old businesses leave, new players will make promises but rarely deliver, for example, the promised ‘Fibreform’ (processed wood) factory in the 1990s, or the fabled ‘new mill’ which re-appears as a prospect each decade. The salmon farms, which at first looked like the new saviour for The Valley, now have a strong voice when any other polluting business idea is mooted. Meanwhile, city bureaucrats in government departments change rules and redirect resources, gaining a (resisted) control as the proportion of towns-people dependent upon welfare increases. Things that are simply pragmatic decisions to those outside the town, (eg. raising the standards that apply to apprenticeships) can become body-blows to local operators. Meanwhile, a new road (to the Derwent Valley, making a ring-route out from Hobart through picturesque forest and rural districts) could make all the difference to Geeveston’s fledgling tourist industry, but it is vetoed by successive governments (and ‘the greenies’). Each of these things have become both a point of moral high-ground and of wounded ‘other-ness’ to ‘them’ – to people who live in cities.

For Geeveston, entering the 21st Century, geography is marginal, economy is insecure and identity is very much ‘other’. Things that were honourable work have become vilified and politicised, and things that were careful and sensible are becoming senseless and wasteful. From here stems both the heartbreak and the fury. It is *these inversions* that are the ‘flashpoints’ - when current realities differ so greatly from private and collective stories of ‘what was’ and ‘what should be’.

### *Apples in the wind*

At the peak of Perrins Rd, promising spring apple blossom gives way to summer apples bobbing, and then to drying autumn apples swinging idly in the wind as they wrinkle and desiccate on the tree. Locals explain that it is not worth Zac’s time or money to pick again this year. They know why: ‘It costs more to have them picked than he’ll get back for juicing apples.’. They still criticise: ‘Sitting inside doing nothing...’; ‘Such a waste...’ (Conversation with community member, April 1999). Within the district, in the absence of a tangible embodied ‘other’ to blame, wider

market conditions have become reasons to throw (verbal) rocks at each other, and scorn is often turned on insiders.

The ever-widening division that runs through this community is 'the working' and 'the not working'. This sits in contrast to the more traditional working class / middle class divides of earlier Australian community studies (eg. 'Bradstow', Wild 1978; and 'Open Cut', Williams 1981a). Numbers of middle-class families have shrunk since the businesses and banks left (in the 1980s and 1990s). Meanwhile, the number of families on benefits or compensation continues to increase.

Hard work does not always equal the good life, and there are some that know this all too well. Manual occupations are often repetitive and dangerous. Larger companies that have moved into the district are focussed upon export dollars and have few local and personal allegiances, investing little in their workers. John (mid 20s) has been battling the same 'compo' case (workers' compensation) with one such company since I first interviewed him in 1997. Meanwhile, Phillip (mid 30s) explained his own reluctance to work. After being injured, repatriated, redeployed, re-injured: 'What - do I want to be employed again so that I can go and lose another bit of my body?' (Fieldnotes April 1999).

Many of the people I spoke to were either claiming some sort of workers' compensation, or had parents who were doing so. Some town-folk suggest a high correlation between 'compo' and depression / mental health issues, between unemployment and loss of meaning. More general ABS statistics (ABS 1997c) lend support to these ideas. Some working locals also suggest a high correlation between 'compo' and 'laziness'. Again, the problem resides in the way that labour and industry are structured, but the local effect is to 'divide and conquer'.

### *A good wood stack*

In this town, work is not just about employment, but about a respectable way of life:

People judge each other very harshly here. Big ideas of what other people should be doing, not very forgiving if you don't fit in with that. You're judged on whether you work hard, and whether you're providin'

for your family. Whether you work hard and whether you got a big wood stack in the yard. And if you got those 2 things, it doesn't matter what else you're doing - whether you even talk to your family - whether you're beating your wife or anything - what happens behind closed doors - they say that's none of our business. But here - if you got a good big neat woodpile and you're providing for your family - *as long as you're providing for 'em - then you're a good bloke - and people are judged like that.* (Reconstructed conversation with 'Brian', 13 April, 1999)

Brian, a born-and-bred-local who lived out of town for several years, now finds himself in a position to analyse his own old habits. It is in becoming, or coming into contact with, the 'Stranger', (the 'other') that one is forced to question assumptions and normal ways of doing things (Simmel 1908; Schutz 1944):

That's how people are judged - we used to laugh at them - 'cos they were *'out there getting their behinds wet'*. On a wet day they'll be out there trying to get wood - and of course it's not going to burn - these people just won't plan ahead - won't think about tomorrow - *sort of people who aren't employed and that - because they don't think ahead, they're judged by everybody else.* (Brian, 13 April 1999)

'Providing for' the family is a gendered activity but the concern is not limited to males: 'My mother always felt secure - coming up to winter - when the cupboards were full and there was a good big neat wood stack.' (Brian, 13 April 1999). A domestic woodpile of generous proportions, all dry and neatly stacked, becomes a shared symbol of a man's worth:

AW: (later) Is it really true about judging each other and the wood stack?

Brian: Oh yeah - its prob'ly the best example of it, and you'll see 'em everywhere.

AW: Yeah actually I did - I was looking for a kid [s place] on the way down and he said: 'It's the house with the wood stack'!  
(both laugh)

Brian: You got to have 'em out there, and *you got to have 'em on show.*

Brian went on to tell the story of his own indignity and wounded pride when his new 'outsider' bride: '...wouldn't let me keep the wood stack out the front'.

### *Scrutiny and stories*

As an outsider, when in town I had a strong sense of surveillance - of being watched. Insiders also claim 'being watched' as central to their own lived experiences. In a small town like this, there is shared ownership of individuals' identities, and of their stories.

While I was interviewing Dale, a car drove past (fast), turned, and sped back down the road. Dale smiled knowingly. 'What?' He explained that last week at work they had been 'hassling' him about 'the blonde' he had been seen with (me). He also explained that any story takes two days to get right around the town: 'Then it stops, 'cos everyone's heard it before'. (Dale 2:10)

Locals explain that this can be a frustrating but endearing feature of town life:

Geeveston has friendly people. They know too much about everyone else's business, but it's part and parcel. But if there's anything wrong there's always someone asking: 'Is there anything I can do...?' (Teacher 6, September 1995:2)

But growing up under constant scrutiny can also be claustrophobic:

Especially down here cause if you do something the next 5 seconds you come to school, its' 'round. (Elizabeth 543:545)

Oh, don't know, I suppose it's just small and that people tend to know you, but it can also have its disadvantages... Ah, you can't keep a secret, people can't keep a secret, because they keep fooling around. It's like a lot of country places isn't it, people like, when somebody does something its around the town in five minutes, that's what it's like. (Ben 1387:1399)



From time to time, scrutiny and critical morality combine to erupt in public outbursts. The sign on the stripped shop-window of 'Farmhouse Quality Meats' reads:

Due to the lack of support within this community this business has been forced to close...

and some packing tape stuck across the top says:

Our high prices and poor quality didn't help either. (Fieldnotes, October 1997)

The ways in which things are publicly storied can be quite political. 'Official' storying (eg. in the Huon news) can be empowering for the powerful, while 'unofficial' storying (eg. public gossip) is further disempowering for the less powerful.

### *Good news*

The Huon News consistently and publicly proclaims the community's prouder moments every Wednesday - sports trophies, business investments, public contributions, children's events and youth achievements. The paper-staff take seriously their role of morale-building, and reporting 'positive things' as well as the more familiar issues and struggles (conversation with staff member, 1993). Definitions of good news favour respectability, traditional values, and progress.

There are other pockets of 'good news' that are not privileged and not being publicly re-told in the ways that the protagonists would tell them. Mike moved from Sydney 9 months ago and he believes that he is 'in Heaven'. He is unemployed but he sees this as a peaceful, viable lifestyle here (unlike in Sydney). He points to the ease with which one can 'get together the basics', for example collecting firewood, and the cheap price of housing: 'Y' just don't need more than that here.' Living in Geeveston increases his options for a 'good life':

Look, here if you've got \$5 in your pocket then you're the richest man in the world. You can get some fish 'n' chips, and a bottle of something to drink and then go fishing all day... She's beaut. Fresh air and a bit of quiet, couldn't ask for anything more. (Fieldnotes, October 1998)

Like fishing all day, there are other activities that will be storied in contrasting ways, depending upon who is talking. While the 'hoons' are 'the only thing wrong' with the district for Jenny, for Brett, 'hooning' is the only thing right with it (see Appendix A: 'Going mental in cars' for this story).

*'My Geeveston': different voices, different stories*

When asked about Geeveston, nearly everyone talks about clean air, space, beauty and a community that 'look out for each other'. Beyond this, depending upon who is asked, Geeveston is actually the name of many different towns. For Sandra, the community represents 'one big happy family'.

Everyone shares Geeveston - its' everyone's' place. (Sandra, 1:4)

By way of contrast, Angela's lived experience centred around social divisions and fear. She tells the story of needing to pick up the kids from school in the car (despite the distance being less than 5 minutes' walk) so that they would not get 'roughed-up' or 'hassled' on the way home (interview with a parent, September 1995). Another teenager explains how one early dispute has led to a situation where he and his 'outsider' family are being 'frozen out' of town – their house is now on the market (One-off interview with 'Andrew', May 1999).

The relatively harsh social conditions described throughout this chapter are being felt more acutely by some individuals than by others. Those with more resources to draw upon outside that community, and / or more power within local arrangements, also tell more positive stories about living there – they are living there 'by choice'. From interviews, this is true of parents and their kids. As they plan to leave so that the kids can further their education, Helen explains (tearfully):

It was a deliberate strategy, a lifestyle choice to stay here... It is a good place to raise a family... We like having close neighbours... I like the people down here - they're friendly and caring, lots of community spirit. Down here people gather around (tears)... We feel a part of the wider community. We know most people and where they live. There are some negatives - some times you feel people know too much. But if anything goes wrong there's always someone there to help, and if something good happens, they share it with you. If one of the kids is in the Huon news, they will come and congratulate them, and the phone rings lots (more tears). (Parent 4, September 1995)

Conversely, the less power locally and/or the less access to outside opportunities, the worse are the stories about the place, and the more imposing and invasive become the sanctions and scrutiny of others:

None of our parents would have told us to get on out of here but that's what we're telling our kids - don't ever come back down here - except to visit us. (Parent 5, September 1995)

The more that families are subject to what happens locally, the more they are disturbed by difference:

It used to be nice - then the druggies moved in - rif raf - never had half the burglaries before. Used to be able to go out and leave the place unlocked, now you've gotta lock everything up, even the mailbox! I used to leave money in there for the garbage man - now I got to stick around and give it to him direct. I pick up the mail as soon as it arrives. When we was kids we used to walk around the streets, we'd never even think of touching anyone's property! (Parent 1995:7)

There are significant links to class. Relative economic comfort coincides with the propensity to regularly travel in and out of town. Those who can do this on a daily basis (eg. commute / have a family member who commutes) seem to be less caught up in local criticism, can afford to be more generous with other subcultural activity, and are more affectionate and humorous about the town's peculiarities. Meanwhile

to those who have everything invested in earlier forms of town life, alternative activities and social changes can easily (both subjectively and objectively) become a threat.

Lived experiences differ along the lines of gender as well. Although young men are likely to report a sense of contentment with living there: 'It's OK.' Geeveston is rarely just Ok for girls. Unlike male counterparts - who can 'middle' through (at neither end of the spectrum), the lived experiences of young women appear to be much more intensely analyzed and/or critically negotiated – they are polarized – and the place is either a haven or a prison (or both). This point will be picked up in later chapters.

### *Aboriginal stories*

Despite a high Aboriginal population (13% where the national average is 2% ABS 1997a; ABS 1997b), Aboriginal history sits like an awkward sub-plot on the town's written histories and is rarely featured in conversation. Tasmanians have been brought up believing that Tasmanian Aboriginal people had died out with Truganini in 1877. A recent compilation of local Aboriginal oral history is aptly called: 'We who are not here' (Friend 1992). Like the rest of Tasmania, where dispossessions occurred - here Aboriginal claims on land and culture have been disrupted, but European-based information sources are very limited regarding what has happened. Oral histories link back to a few tribal women who never left the land (Friend 1992).

Individual Tasmanian Aboriginal descendants explain to me that skin colour disappears in about 2 generations - making aboriginal descendency easy to deny. One older woman explained: 'I didn't see myself as any different, and I didn't *want* to be any different.' (Reconstructed conversation from Cygnet, 1993). A desire to 'blend in' meant her family denying their own heritage. The gathering of the descendants of Fanny Cochrain-Smith in recent years has led to a process of discovery and rediscovery. Much of the history of other families has been lost but the people remain a strong presence - as Jim Everett, Tasmanian Aboriginal educationalist recently stated in an ABC TV documentary: 'We were never lost, we just didn't know that they were looking for us.' (Everett 2001).

Within this context, it is understandable that the two respondents in this study who identify as Aboriginal *see it as neither a major point of identity, nor a significant source of difference*. Wider cultural expectations ensure that it stays this way.

### *Recent changes and challenging futures*

A glorious past and an unsettled present leave Geeveston with the challenge of creating a sustainable future. Natural resources are abundant but the issue is about using them in a way that is valued both by locals and by the outside world. Local stories are also abundant, but there is often a lack of dialogue with the outside world. Although the school and a younger generation have embraced tourism, it seems to have been very much externally imposed on older community members as a solution. With Federal Government funding related to the Helsham Inquiry (1980s), in 1991 the Geeveston Town Hall was converted into 'Forest and Heritage Centre' - visited by tourists, but largely worked-around by locals. The ecologically-based sentiments that are appealing to tourists are often less than appealing to locals. Older community members explain about the Town Hall:

And the greenies. They bugger it up every time you want to start something up. They even took our town hall. Now it's used as a haven for greenies and their artifacts. We haven't got any place to vote any more except the school. And the kids used to use the hall for their socials and it used to be a cinema.... (Parent, September 1995)

'We used to have our dances and films there, before *they took it over*' (Parent, October 1999).

This disparity of understandings often puts Geeveston at odds with the very thing that could save it. The only significant development funds that the town is likely to access from state and federal governments will be in relation to tourist dollars. One new project for which both local and outsiders have high hopes, is the 'Airwalk' – a viewing place from which to see the southern forests (and foresting operations). Its construction (by Forestry Tasmania) is creating considerable short-term work.

New industries have moved in to The Valley, for example 'the fish' (extensive salmon farms and a huge processing plant). These are owned by outsiders and create substantial casual employment, but do not create meaning and purpose for locals.

During the fieldwork for this study, the sight of houses sitting empty by the side of the road was common:

I think I just drove past six houses in a row with 'for sale' signs on them.

(Research journal, October 1997)

Families had moved out, but: 'can't ask anything for them'. The Wells family started again elsewhere in the state but could no longer afford their own house: 'We've lost everything.' (conversation with parent, 1998). Later in the study these same empty houses are attracting low-income families from around Hobart (local folklore has it that the State housing commission bought the properties because of their low prices). These new families bring and share few valued resources. Their presence becomes part of stories about social fragmentation: from the young (eg. Ben 3:20), about the town getting taken over by: 'Homey kids and shit' (here 'Homey' refers to 'homeboy', displayed in American city-style music and clothing); and from their parents: 'Come down and vandalise everything - should send 'em all back where they came from.' (Parent, August 1999).

The last decade has seen significant changes in people's day-to-day movements. At the start of this study, few would have considered commuting for school or work. Increasingly, they do. Because of this, the distance to Hobart is shrinking markedly, *but it is only shrinking for some*. For others who have lived in Geeveston all their lives, their own town is increasingly becoming a place of strangers while the city is still alien. This is problematic when futures, both corporate and individual, may actually depend upon close links with city.

### *Being young in Geeveston*

Each of these things are general challenges for everybody in the town. Being young, though, accentuates all sorts of issues, like distance, transport, privacy (others talk). In a community of people who are very familiar to each other, individuals' stories are

‘scripted’ by others’ expectations – which puts an extraordinary kind of pressure on teenagers making a life.

Small numbers of other young people leads to some other issues. The sense of: ‘all pull together or we go under’ is felt even when individuals decide which sport to play. A struggle for critical mass means that if there are not enough players, there is no football team. In a small town the issue of finding a reference group is complicated by low numbers of teenagers (around 60 on the census and 80 in the school). As they explain: ‘We are all kind of forced in together’.

Options for making a life are limited for some more than others. For example, growing up in Geeveston can be hard if you are a girl. One young woman points to the lack of options for meaning among her peer group, saying: ‘By the time I had finished grade 12, two of my old class were pregnant, one had a baby, one had an abortion, and then there was one other girl and me.’ (Conversation, July 2000).

Over my time in the field, I heard considerable differences in the ways that young people storied their experiences of growing up in town. The desperation I heard in the early 1990s was replaced by the late 1990s by pockets of hope. A few significant individuals with stable networks may well be changing the course of history. The school has been very intentional in what it is doing, not just with young people in terms of options for their own futures, but in fostering a community culture where creating confidence and links to the outside world are central (see also chapter 8). The Huon Valley Youth Service has been involved in creating extensive resource bases and community networks - and in this way has been a quiet shaper of opportunity and culture. The well-targeted activities of trusted facilitators can have a big impact in a small community.

Still, like every other small town in rural Australia, and Tasmania itself, the needs of young people to be drawing on a broader resource base *clash directly* with issues of local sustainability. As families move out (eg. for education), the critical mass of the town is lowered again.

The end of grade ten is a particularly salient point in Geeveston young people's careers. Though most students from the area attend the Geeveston District High School, the nearest secondary college (grades 11-13) is 57 kilometres away. Urban young people are increasingly creating biographies out of overlaps, zigzags and shuffles between life projects, education and work. However, the work of others (which was reviewed in chapter two) show that decision processes and the related costs of decisions are qualitatively different for rural students (Looker and Dwyer 1997). In this setting, young people who do not continue education but stay in Geeveston, face limited job opportunities and/or long-term unemployment. Older role-models (including their parents) stopped their own education early. Over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the (age 15+) population stopped their schooling at age 15 and under. This compares to just over  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the (age 15+) population nationally (ABS 1997a; ABS 1997b). To continue further education is one of the biggest single life-choices that a Geeveston young person can make.

### **About this research**

The research follows the stories of 32 of Geeveston's young people as they go about the process of making a life. It is qualitative and longitudinal, and spans the time from early high school to post-high school options and issues for this subject group. The focus is upon trajectory and meaning, upon practice and story, upon individuals' courses of action, and the sense that those same individuals are making of them.

In the process of doing this research, a whole range of methodological issues and implications arose, and most of these will be explored further in Chapter 9. The rest of this chapter simply outlines the research process.

### *Background*

Research often focusses on settings where researchers have a passion (Becker 1986) and an 'in' (that is, prior exposure, contacts, as well as burning questions) (see Lofland and Lofland 1984). All are true of this research. From 1991-4 I had been employed in youthwork within The Valley, and I also focussed my honours fieldwork there (1995). This piece of research, then, represents a culmination of nearly 10 years' (intermittent) focus around one community.



Two earlier research projects formed a foundation for this study: an 'action research' project with young people (1993) and the aforementioned honours thesis (1995). Both will be outlined here because they had significant bearing on the shape of the PhD project (96-2001), the former because of background information and relationships formed, the latter because it also located the respondents who were involved in this longitudinal research.

Action research with youth-group (1993) In its most basic form, action research is basically about 2 different kinds of outcomes: research in the form of understanding, and action in the form of change (Dick 1995). It should be a collaborative effort, and the issue under scrutiny should stem from recognised community need, rather than the interest of the researcher (Voth 1979). This study excelled in youth-involvement but was relatively low on rigour. As a regional youth-worker (at the time employed by churches) for The Valley (150 kms to drive around the town centres) I could only resource groups who were interested in doing projects themselves. A Geeveston church youthgroup made contact because their peers had 'nothing to do' (lack of meaning and purpose in spare time around Geeveston). They felt that the town was quite hostile to 'the youth problem' after some particularly rough (vigilante) activity against a group of young people, and they wanted to do something useful. Supported by youth leaders, school teachers, community members and the council youthworker we started our work with information gathering. The young people interviewed their friends about what it was like for them to live in Geeveston, and what was needed. We all interviewed community leaders, members and parents. Information was compiled in meetings (over home-made biscuits), and adults finished the draft. The finished report 'Geeveston youth: gateway to our future' (Geeveston Youth Outreach 1993) was launched to the community, local politicians and media, at a youth performance event. The findings led to a series of youth activities the following year. Perhaps discounting rigour, depending upon whose definitions are used (see examples of debates in Hart and Bond 1995), retrospectively it is clear that this project met most of the key criteria for action research. At the time, though, we were not even aware that there was a name for what we were doing.

Honours project (1995) This focussed on Geeveston young people's different aspirations, and the different ways that they were thinking about their futures. Fieldwork involved essays, interviews and limited observations. With school co-operation, and through their health class, all year seven and eight students (41) wrote three essays: 'Who am I?'; 'Who do I look up to and why'; 'What will I be doing in five years, ten years, fifteen years...'. I conducted interviews with 16 young people, who were 'theoretically sampled' according to emergent categories of difference: male/female, working class / middle-class, and whether or not they had lived in the district all their lives ('movers' and 'non-movers'). At the time I also selected these respondents from among older (year nine/ten) and younger (year seven /eight) students, in order to get a sense for what was happening at different ages. (Although 'age' in itself ceased to be of interest for the current study, this starting-point meant that I had already found a cohort that spanned cliques and specific year-group dynamics, which was very useful in terms of data. Within this group there were also two brother-sister dyads which helped to get a feel for some family dynamics. Six parents and six teachers were also interviewed for the purposes of triangulating data and better understanding context.

A model of different aspirations and stories had begun to emerge (Wierenga 1995), and over time and more fieldwork, this was further developed as 'cultural orientations' (Wierenga 1999).

### *Respondents*

Respondents who were interviewed and wrote essays in the 1995 research also became the cohort for this longitudinal study. All students in one of the classes (year eight) who had completed essays in 1995 were approached for interviews in 1997. All who had been interviewed in 1995 were also approached for re-interviews. 16 out of the 18 agreed to be re-interviewed. As there was overlap between the school-class of essay-writers and those who had done earlier interviews, this brought the active panel numbers to 32. This meant that the different dimensions from earlier theoretical sampling (class, gender, 'movers' and 'non-movers') were well represented and further built-up. It also maintained some age-differences in the cohort that tempered the dynamics and specific group culture of the (by then

infamous) 'year eights'. Four respondents left the cohort as the study progressed. (I will explain more about the stories, process and implications of their poignant departures in later chapters).

Time spent with Geeveston's kids before doing this study had revealed that access to social goods - to resources - had great bearing on the ways that kids approached their futures. Class was an issue. Class can be conceptualized at a number of different levels. At theory level it is about control of the means of production, (including farming). In order to operationalize the concept in this context, I have adopted socioeconomic status as an indicator of difference in class situation at an experiential level. Describing the key household income earner, there are clear status differences. At the level of common sense these are best captured in the language of middle class, and working class. Within the working class group, 1/3 came from families who were not currently working (see table 1, next page).

Time in the field before the study had also clearly demonstrated that gender was an issue. Around the town there is a lot of attention paid to gendered practices at the level of everyday theorizing. One working-class mother explained the differences that she had observed: 'Girls seem to find jobs more and apply themselves better to what they're doing. Boys don't worry - then end up unemployed.' (Parent 1, September 1995:20). As they go about the process of making lives, local young women and young men are actually doing quite different things, and I wanted to understand this better.

From conversations with young people, and from the stories of others, it was also becoming clear that a very significant difference in these young people's ways of being in the world was based around whether they had spent all of their lives in The Valley or grown up elsewhere. This seemed to be shaping both their outlooks and their willingness to engage outside The Valley. The categories of 'moving' and 'non-moving' are a reflection of this.

Although two respondents were Aboriginal, they neither saw this as a point of difference or a significant feature of their identities.

**Table 1: Respondent characteristics (unlinked)**

Emergent categories	Social class			Gender		History	
	Middle class	Working class		female	Male	'Moving'	'Non-moving'
		working	Non-working				
Number	8	16	8	18	14	13	19
Total number	32			32		32	

Table 1 shows all of these significant respondent characteristics, but none have been linked because of the potential for identification and loss of anonymity. In a town of less than one hundred teenagers (ABS 1997a), once a young person's school year-group, social class, gender and moving/non moving status are linked, there is every chance of them being recognised.

Not captured by table 1, but also significant, was the mixture of respondents' attitudes to being involved in the research. Individuals have different reactions to being asked to tell their story - delight, relief, amusement, interest, fear and anger. There was early trust and easy communication with some. With others, every negotiation was a struggle (with the issues raised, if not with each other). So why not steer clear of problematic encounters for their sake and mine? To stick with young people who are easy-going with this kind of process would produce a narrow picture of making a life in Geeveston, and learning would be limited. It would also mean writing-off the potential value of this story-telling process for anyone who did not normally respond easily to this sort of challenge (ie. to exaggerate the point a little, anyone not middle-class). This decision meant steering straight into some more thought-provoking encounters (more on this in chapter 9).

*Approach and methods for this study*

For the longitudinal study, fieldwork again involved interviews and observations. A 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; see Strauss and Corbin 1990; Glaser 1992) was adopted. The research followed an inductive process, that is, driven by emergent themes from fieldwork rather than by theory. The interviews, in particular, formed an 'iterative spiral' (see Minichiello et al. 1995). This means that

early findings inform later data collection, patterns are found and verified over time, and 'negative cases' or surprises in the data lead to more intense inquiry surrounding those surprises, until a satisfactory account of each can be given.

In the 1997 interviews we again looked at issues of what individuals wanted to do with their lives, and why and how they could see it happening (or not). We also looked at issue of process and change: 'what's changed since last time?', and what they were going to do next year (most respondents would soon be leaving year 10 - which in Tasmania signifies the end of high school).

Two years later (1999), re-interviews with the same respondents captured some of the changes and dynamics that came after finishing year 10. Rather than simply being about aspirations, this was a chance to explore respondents practices in more grounded and concrete ways.

Over the 5 years from 1995 to 1999 (inclusive), the stories and trajectories of 32 young people were followed. Included in this number are 4 young women who withdrew *during* the re-interviews (ie. agreed and then quietly subverted the process). Their practices of resistance, the dynamics between us, and their silence became a significant part of the whole study. The issues raised by their (partial) involvement will be explored in later chapters.

My theoretical sampling (Strauss 1987; see also Charmaz 2000) also meant selectively interviewing other individuals from time-to-time, as new issues arose and they needed more clarification than I felt I could get from within the cohort. One example of this might be about the lived experience of being 'unemployed in Geeveston, looking for work' as compared to being 'unemployed and in Geeveston, not looking for work'.

Focussed interviews (see Merton et al. 1956) meant starting with themes (see list Appendix B) rather than questions. This open-ness of agenda was not only an effective method, but it became very important to our collaborative projects of 'storying'. Interviews happened in negotiated locations (home, in the yard, on 'smoko' at work, parks, cars, school, cafes, walking the dog) and varied in length

from 20 minutes to two hours. These negotiated differences between interviews add some significant dimensions to the fieldwork data.

Interviews were a little more 'staggered' than is suggested by the neat 1995, 1997, 1999 descriptions that I will use throughout the thesis for clarity of chronology and process. Although working in a small town meant that respondents were usually easy to find (everybody knows where everybody else has gone), occasionally, and for different reasons (eg. respondent did not want to talk yet / could not find them), interviews did not happen when planned and were returned to later. Hand-written notes were kept in the 1995 interviews, but in 1997 and 1999 all except two interviews were tape-recorded (one a technical mistake, the other a choice not to inhibit a shy respondent).

Observations, fieldnotes and 'journalling' (unfocussed researcher musings) continued throughout. An abundance of information came from the negotiations around interviews, between family members in homes and young people in peer groups. The formlessness of fieldwork meant establishing some disciplines. For example, just being there, deliberately watching around town was important. Both tape-recorder and notes became very valuable for critical reflection (see ch. 9) and for later writing. Multiple methods of data collection meant being able to focus on both the 'spoken' and the 'unspoken' - recognising some of the many layers of things going on in local life. Sometimes observations corroborated the spoken words, and at other times they highlighted discrepancies.

#### *Data processing, analysis and writing-up*

Interviews were transcribed and then analysed in two different ways. Firstly they were read and re-read, and themes emerged. From there, transcripts were re-read in the light of the themes, and themes were further elaborated into codes (manually on paper, line-by-line) and cross-compared. The first process looks like grounded theory as espoused by Glaser (1992). This is a relatively simple process of finding and naming themes in the transcripts, going through them again checking for evidence, coding according to these categories, and writing-up the relationships.

The second process looked a little more like the model of grounded theory advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990; see also Corbin and Strauss 1990). Selected (rich) interviews were imported into 'Atlas' (a computer program for qualitative research), and put through an intricate process of coding on screen: open coding (as above), axial coding (making connections between categories and their subcategories), and selective coding (all categories are unified around a core category – eg. 'negotiations' - and gaps in the data are explored). Although I had intended to process all of the second round of interviews through Atlas, a 'saturation' of themes and categories was occurring at around 9 interviews (the same patterns kept appearing) and I stopped this process at number 12. Meanwhile, massive amounts of data had been generated, with a code-list at over 300 (see Appendix C).

Interestingly, these two coding processes led to qualitatively different types of data. The former makes great linkages about social process, the latter, abundant detail to better elaborate these processes. Another result of different coding methods, and one that will become evident to the reader, is incongruity in the way that quotes have been referenced. Quotes coded by hand look like this: (Pete [interview] 3, [page] 10); when Atlas creates citations in a different way: (Pete [interview] 3, [text-line numbers] 906-913).

### *The completed study*

This project was collaborative research – very much shaped by the agendas and interests of the young people involved (see chapter 9 for a more in-depth discussion of respondent collaboration / participation). The joint real-world projects were respondents' stories of 'past, present, future and me'. The collaboration is in the process of 'storying' (storytelling, listening, retelling) itself. The terms 'storying' and 'to story' are being claimed here as verbs - they are practices in which individuals and / or social groups are differently involved.

In the completed study, some details (names, places, jobs, hobbies) have been changed. Characters have sometimes been split in two, to separate more recognizable stories from those of a more sensitive nature. One of my biggest regrets is the fragmentation of individuals' stories, and even how incorporation of stories into themes is, in one sense, a poor acknowledgment of individual contributors and

their rich lives. Ironically, I have needed to cut up stories in order to render them unrecognisable, and at the same time also keep the story's integrity (ie. not change every detail to the point where they were simply not the same story). Fragmenting people's stories might be a 'violent' act but far less so than exposure in a small town. This is also an issue of purpose and objectives. Good interpretive (thematic) studies have the potential to usefully critique social structures and processes. Social change requires good critique.

### *Some opportunities and limitations of chosen methods*

Rather than drawing out one feature of young people's lives to look at (eg. continuing education), the scope of a PhD looked like an invitation to engage with some local complexities - to try to better understand what it was to make a life in the context of that community. There were both advantages and disadvantages to these methods. From a period of immersion in the community, it takes time to claim back any sense of conceptual clarity. The hardest part of the study involved sitting with the data, reading and scribbling until chaos became (relative) order. This took years. Everything becomes relevant to the subject of making a life - it is a 'task with no edges'. Perhaps this unlimitedness of focus is one reason why there are relatively few community-based studies of young people in Australia. It is far more common to see youth research draw on national data bases, or on large groups that share a particular trait (eg. unemployed) than to focus upon groups within a shared context, and all that entails (Looker 1996).

Most research on young people is managed through institutions where young people are 'clients', or 'students', focussing on one single role within young people's complex lives. There is less research that focusses on young people's lives more holistically, that explores complexity, how young people juggle different roles and identities (Looker 1996; Fitzclarence 1996), or the interplay of different transitions (Looker and Dwyer 1997). This kind of research allows such a focus.

Through its qualitative methods, this research focusses on one small group of young people in a certain place and time. Statements will be made about this group of young people, but they will never be generalized to whole populations. The concepts may be useful elsewhere, but the model is strongly local.



Longitudinal fieldwork is good for exploring social process – and the research is ‘film’ rather than ‘snapshot’. With interviews, returning again and again meant not just a chance to clarify stories, but a chance to hear different stories from the same authors (prospective and retrospective). Reliability in grounded theories is about corroboration of data; concepts *earn* their way into these studies by being constantly present (or conspicuously absent) in interviews (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Repeatedly going back meant the chance to re-check stories, to compare the stories of others, to test interpretations and concepts / constructs, and to test and clarify understandings about social process. Returning also meant opportunities to check discrepancies in the data. ‘Saturation’ of some ideas came early, and for others it was elusive. There are still some unanswered (unanswerable?) questions (more about this in chapter 9).

Re-interviewing also meant good opportunities to verify data and build models of what was happening in the field. As mentioned earlier, I was able to follow a ‘recursive’ or ‘iterative’ model (see Minichiello et al. 1995). On the basis of interviews / observations:

Formulate proposition => interview => record data => analyse data =>  
focus questions in light of analysis => select negative case => interview  
=> record data => analyse => formulate / revise proposition => focus /  
pose new question => the process continues ... => saturation /  
verification stops process.

This meant continually asking new questions about earlier data, and targeting surprises (negative cases, things that had been unexpected) with new questions. For example: Mark was not initiating job-seeking, but he was the first to get a job. What is going on here? It was this process of ‘interrogating surprises’ that led to the most significant learnings (more on this in chapter 9).

Researchers usually face some complexities accessing respondents, accessing data, and maintaining that access (see Lofland and Lofland 1984). These issues were easier to manage over a long time in the one field. ‘Insiders’ (youthworkers, teachers, parents, community leaders, peers) offered significant assistance at all

times, and as time progressed there were more insiders who understood about the research. Their help was rarely about direct liaison with respondents as such, but about just being there amidst relationships of trust, which made me and the project more approachable to those I sought for interviews or conversations.

Work with young people means extra legal and moral duties of care, an extra layer of 'gatekeepers' for accessing respondents initially, and some important protocols for each encounter thereafter. Working in a community where I was already known helped in this process. Chapter 9 includes a more thorough reflection about these things.

This is a community-based study, ethnographic in style (focussed on people's practices and meanings in a given social setting). This means the analysis will deal with patterns within a complex topic (making a life) rather than claim authority over a more limited topic. Findings will be more exploratory than explanatory. The story that will unfold in the following pages is not linear but thematic.

### **Making sense of it all**

In this chapter I have touched upon some of the issues being faced by young people who are growing up in Geeveston. I have highlighted some specific changes – many of them negative - that have become particular challenges for this generation of young people growing up in Geeveston. Finally, I have introduced my research project, which explores how Geeveston's young people are differently going about the process of making their lives within this social context.

We have seen that Geeveston's young people's issues are intertwined with the unique history, geography, economy and cultural identity of the area. The shift from 'centrality' to 'marginality' in terms of geography, economy, and identity has featured strongly. In amongst local issues, though, we could hear many echoes from the research about other places in rural Australia, for example changes in industry, rationalizations, population decline and the issue of young families and young people staying and leaving. Set within the wider national picture, we can get a sense of why apples may be swinging unpicked on the trees while there are not many jobs available, and the reasons lie well beyond The Valley.

Having got some sense of the social context, we can focus our attention on the young people making a life within these circumstances.

To watch any young people making a life is to observe something quite mysterious. Examining this mystery can be likened to examining a jewel or gemstone. Each facet of the stone frames a new view of the whole, and a different view into a much more complex reality. Although each facet reveals something unique, each also hints at things that can be seen more clearly through other facets. Rather than aiming to be exhaustive, the chapters that follow are thematic. There will be many gaps and some overlaps. On the basis of these young people's more poignant stories, I have chosen only five themes, five 'facets' that reflect different views into some fairly complex realities. These are: about 'storying' (see chapter 4); 'negotiating changes' (chapter 5); 'practices of engagement' (6); 'resources' (7); and 'resource flows' (8).

#### **4. Towards an interpretive framework**

To ask a young person about their future is not just to inquire about some isolated goals, but to be given directions into the world of meaning in which they live. In 1995, when I started asking respondents: 'What do you want to do, and why?', they responded with abundant and varied stories about 'past, present, future and me'.

This chapter starts by exploring some of the most significant differences between respondents' stories. In the following pages, I will present a way of thinking about how Geeveston's young people are differently orienting themselves towards the project of making a life. Rather than being theoretically driven, the conceptual scheme arose out of early conversations with respondents. This scheme would also become central to subsequent data collection and analysis. Insider accounts, and the patterns in these, make good sense of local practices. Examples are issues like: staying in town or going; 'staying on' at school to finish year 12 or leaving early; or sticking alongside the familiar faces of peers and families or leaving them too. Of particular interest in this chapter are insights gained from the earliest interviews, when most respondents are in year 8 (early high school) but a few of the older ones are preparing to leave grade 10.

Back then, and still now it seems as if the most profound differences in respondents' stories are between those set in 'global' world or 'local' worlds, and also whether these stories themselves are 'clear' or 'unclear' (fragmented).

##### **Known worlds: 'global' or 'local'**

A 'sense of place' is of utmost significance in the stories told by respondents. From one respondent to another it is the shape of that place that differs. Noah's world consists of Geeveston and nearby towns. His family has lived locally for generations, and his relatives have settled around The Valley. Daily activities also occur within the context of The Valley: 'Footy, take m' bike up top paddock, work on the bikes with Col, collect wood with Uncle Merv....' Like his grandfather and uncle, Noah wants to be 'a truckie'. He does not see much sense in continuing education or broadening his options: 'All my friends are here.' (1:2).

Chloe's world is a little larger. She wants to be a nurse:

That means I'll have to go to Uni in Launceston and I'll probably have to live in Hobart for a while. That would be hard, getting to know new people and everything, but Julie - she's my friend from netball - she's trained to be a nurse and she says at the college it's easy enough to get to know other people. (1:3)

Chloe plays on a state team and gets to talk to Julie when they practice in Hobart.

The main difference in these respondents' plans is a focus on / *engagement within The Valley*, versus a focus on / *engagement in a world beyond The Valley*.

Respondents are basing their stories on 'known worlds'. To some extent all respondents have an *awareness* of the world outside Geeveston, but not necessarily a *working knowledge*. (This is why the District High School runs an annual 'city orientation' program in Hobart for senior students.) Engagement in 'local' or 'global' worlds also correlates with respondents' intentions to 'stay' in town or 'go' – ie. move even for a time, or leave to complete education (Wierenga 1999).

The significance of geography, locality or 'place' in the structuring of young people's lives has already been a source of sociological interest. For instance Giddens (1991) asserts that in late modernity, place becomes unimportant, and the role of locality is usurped by mass communication systems. By way of contrast, Furlong and Cartmel (1997:94, 113) argue that individuals' opportunities and life chances' are structured through 'lived' rather than simply 'mediated' experiences (Furlong and Cartmel 1997:113). Even if Geeveston's young people are exposed, for example, to more universalized media input than ever before, they are receiving these other stories into lives that are grounded within local circumstance and possibility. What is seen on the TV screen is actually a distortion of the social world that they can actually access (see Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Further, more globalized stories about social reality are received into the context of local history, conditions and relationships, and so individuals are making use of this input quite differently to one another.

*Among the young people in this study, a sense of 'place' or a sense of the 'known world' very strongly underpins stories of past, and stories of possibilities. Within respondents' stories, real-world spaces are actually functioning as boundaries on their imaginations (Wierenga 1999). Individuals' 'known worlds' are being mapped out through their lived experience. The known world sets the parameters of where the individual realistically sees themselves travelling. These young people are constructing their stories by using the cultural resources (ideas, meanings, practices), already on offer. They glean and appropriate this cultural material from others (family, peers, school, community, mass media), but are piecing it together idiosyncratically. Every idea encountered and assimilated in history (or herstory) becomes a resource for imagination about futures. In this way, future plans are autobiographical. To ask about the future is to hear about the past.*

In interviews, we also jointly explore the distinction between individuals' future plans and 'impossible dreams'. I ask: 'If you had everything you needed, and could choose anything to do with yourself, what would it be?'. Individuals' stories about of their dreams also reveal the limits of their known worlds. Chloe (1:2) explains: 'I want to do something that changes things - war, fighting, there's so many people in the 3rd world.'. Meanwhile, Noah's (1:2) dream is to: '... go on unemployment and drive a truck occasionally.'.

### **Clear and unclear stories**

Individuals' stories, as told in interviews, vary not just in content but in form. While some respondents will quite clearly articulate some things that they might do, and how they might go about doing them, others do not. In their stories, respondents show a marked difference in their ability to project themselves into the future.

Bronwyn (1:1) speaks clearly about an area that excites her:

I first started wanting to do this in grade 8. I looked up career options and the subject levels I needed. I looked up 'early childhood teacher' - and when saw that I had a high level in most of the subjects I needed, I thought: *'That's just me!'*

By way of contrast, when I ask Beth what she wants to do with her life, she grimaces, shrugs her shoulders, sighs and apologetically explains: 'I dunno.'. The inability to clearly talk about 'me and my future' corresponds with an inability to articulate stories of 'me and my history'. *Beth can not say where she wants to go, because she does not know where she is, nor where she has come from.*

These ideas have been raised before within the sociological tradition. In 'Sources of the self' Taylor suggests that orientation within the social world has two aspects: 'I can be ignorant of the lie of the land around me...' or '... I can be lost in another way if I don't know how to place myself on this map.' (Taylor 1989:41). Here he is not talking about physical space but 'moral space' (or a space of meaning) and of time. Taylor suggests that individuals grasp the meanings of their lives in narrative: 'In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.' (Taylor 1989:47). These meanings are open to revision, just as individuals are ever changing and 'becoming'.

Narrative theorists (Gergen and Gergen 1988) suggest that within individuals' stories, progress is charted in relation to 'the good' (see also Taylor 1989) or valued goal states. Examples of respondents' valued goal states would be 'a happy family life', 'a good career', 'helping people and easing animal suffering' or 'peace and quiet, footy on Saturdays, and good mates'. For these respondents, having a language (or multiple languages) with which to orient themselves towards valued goals-states, is effectively the difference between 'life as quest' (like a hero/ine in a novel) or 'life as chaos'.

Within the symbolic interactionist tradition over 20 years ago Strauss (1977) pointed out the centrality of language and story to individuals' understanding identity and action. Individuals' accounts are a symbolic ordering of events: 'If your interpretations are convincing to yourself, if you trust your terminology, then there is some kind of continuous meaning assigned to your life as a whole.' (Strauss 1977:145).

Contemporary writing suggests much more fragmented and changeable forms of individual identity (eg. Modjeska 2000). These themes are also borne out within the 'youth' literature (eg. see McLeod 2000). McDonald (1999) points to new

challenges for young people growing up in post-industrial society. For young people confronting dramatic social and cultural change, the lived experience can be one of social fragmentation and corresponding struggles against the fragmentation of self. Also, within this same changing world, he highlights actors' struggles to make sense of their world, their subjectivity and of their relationship to other actors. In the context of weakening socialization and institutions, norms and roles, and the increasing complexity and mobility of social life, McDonald sees the young people involved in his study as involved in particularly intense forms of struggle: '...for connection, for presence and relationship, for dignity, coherence of subjectivity and body, for communication and integrity, for memory and possibility (McDonald 1999:218).

Within this study respondents' stories reflect not just a difference in ability to make sense of – or find meaning in – their own lives, but a profound difference in ability to make sense of the world around them – as such, a 'struggle for subjectivity' (see McDonald 1999). The stories that they tell embody a sense of coherent, trusted and trust-worthy subjectivity (*or not*) with which they can make sense of their own actions and of the situations in which they find themselves.

Other authors have pointed out this connection between social change and new challenges young people face in order to negotiate social life. Social change (eg increased geographical mobility, loosened institutional ties, 'risk-society') heightens the need for individuals to be 'reflexively mobilized' – that is to be self-reflexive managers of their own lives (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Beck et al. 1994). In societies where youth transitions are protracted and de-sequenced it becomes harder for young people to establish identities and sustain coherent narratives (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

Following Garfinkel (1967), who, over 30 years ago, talked about individuals being 'inquirers' regarding the social world around them, the young people in this study could be cast as ethnographers – junior researchers of social life, asking 'what is happening in this setting?', 'what are the rules?', both creating and drawing upon other plausible stories. However, it is not so simple: their accounts during interviews actually show them to be quite differently engaging in, and *very* differently equipped for this task.



Although almost all respondents seem to be developing accounts about their own meaningful paths through the known world - or storying - a sizeable minority are clearly concentrating their energies elsewhere. For some, to story is not 'core-business'. Rather, it seems more likely that negotiating the world is about survival rather than creating any narrative of progress. It looks as if life, through the cultural practices of those around them, has served notice that all available energy belongs in risk-management. In a conversation with Nell, she is ducking and weaving as if to avoid the blows. Both the content and form of her story suggest that she is expecting to have to defend herself:

Nell: Geeveston is stupid. There's nothing to do. It's a big hole. In Hobart you're right next to Kentucky [Fried Chicken].

AW: (Later) Would you go up to town and do college?

Nell: I'm not livin' in town *by miself*! I dunno, all the drongos. My friend was walking through town an' at daytime she got belted up.

AW: What do you want to be doing in 20 years?

Nell: I don't reckon I'll be alive in 20 years. I'll die. Underwater. I don't know. If I get old shoot me. That means that I'd have wrinkles. Yuk!

AW: (Later) Where would you like to be living?

Nell: I'd bring up my family anywhere but 'ere I guess.

AW: (Later) So are you going to have kids?

Nell: Nuh. I 'ope not. Don't want 'em. Nuh. Can't be bothered. *I'm tired.*

AW: How much is enough education? When should you stop?

Nell: Right now is enough. At least the end of high school.

AW: Why do you say you might continue then?

Nell: I have to. Dunno. Be better. Probably. (Nell 1:1-2)

The issue here is not just exposure to different geographical and social worlds, but about a *cultural orientation to life*, and to ways of approaching new options. As well as being a qualitatively different way of being in the world, this is also sociologically interesting, in terms of implications. *When individuals' stories about 'past, present, future and me' are not clear, they have neither the full benefit of backwards*

*references (building on history) or forward references.* They miss out on some of the most basic tools with which to pro-actively and / or creatively (imaginatively) engage with the future (Wierenga 1999).

By clear and unclear stories I mean relative coherency and consistency of individual narratives. Young people live complex lives, and as a result all stories seem to be inconsistent to some extent, ever dynamic, clashing in some places and hazy in others. Also, different roles and settings mean that individuals carry multiple, different (even conflicting) stories about selves and identities (see Buchanan 1993; Fitzclarence 1996; Wyn 2000). All stories are also works-in-progress. By 'clear story', though, I mean *a comparatively high* degree of consistency in what is being said, and that in interviews, an individual's stories mostly integrate with each other.

The clearest stories are the ones where individuals make use of 'thick' descriptions (see Geertz 1975; Kellahear 1993) about both themselves and the world around them. These are rich and multi-layered stories. They present paths through individuals' universes of meaning that have been well travelled, and which have multiple exits and entry points. These stories are full of possibilities – plans, contingencies, past experiences, dreams, anecdotes, beliefs and impossible dreams. Not coincidentally, 'thick' stories tend to have multiple points of connection with the stories that other people tell, for example their community, the institutions with whom these kids must engage, and those that know them well, like parents, teachers or friends. Both in my fieldwork and in the 'fieldwork' of these young ethnographers, this shows up as 'triangulated' data – as effective 'reality-checks' on the stories being told.

Thick stories also appear to leave respondents more flexible. Should circumstances change around them, they have contingency plans, and alternative ways of understanding their situation. Quite related to this issue, Michael White (1990; 1995; 2000), psychotherapist and pioneer of 'narrative therapy' with young people, explains that individuals equipped with thick stories about themselves and their lives are also the most robust in times of crisis.

Cultural orientation: four ideal-types

On the basis of these two differences in respondents’ stories (global/local reference, clear/unclear stories), four ‘ideal-types’ of cultural orientation emerge: ‘Exploring’, ‘Settling’, ‘Retreating’ and ‘Wandering’ (see Figure 2). Although ‘ideal-types’ can never capture complex realities, they can make social patterns and processes much easier to understand (see Weber 1969:250-3). Rather than claiming to be about any psychological ‘essence’ of the bearer, the following types reflect social practices, at a given time and place. Over the 5 years, only a few respondents’ stories will shift in relation to these types.

‘Exploring’ entails a global reference, plus telling clear (if multiple) stories of ‘past, present, future, and me’. ‘Settling’ revolves around a local world, and also telling clear stories about identity. ‘Retreating’ also relates to The Valley only, but with fragmented stories, and ‘wandering’ is about the intention to go into a bigger world, explained with unclear stories.

Figure 2: Four ideal-types of cultural orientation

Focus		Global	Exploring	Wandering	
			Middle class and female working class	Working class, non-working working class Mixed gender	
			Local	Settling	Retreating
			Working class, more male than female	Female Working class + non-working working class	
			Clear	Unclear	
Stories of Identity					

Figure 2 shows how some interesting patterns have emerged in relation to class and gender. At this stage all middle-class respondents (except two - see stories about ‘crisis’ and ‘losing the plot’ in chapter 8) were ‘exploring’. However, not all those who were ‘exploring’ were middle-class. There are kids from working-class families represented here also, and overwhelmingly these are young women. Those ‘settling’

were from working-class background (and one 'non-working' working-class family), and they were predominantly male. They are engaged in a localized world, and can also tell clear stories (if less thickly worded) about identity. Those 'wandering' and 'retreating' were respondents from working-class and 'non-working' families. 'Wandering' individuals were of mixed genders but all of those 'retreating' (at 4 people, by far the smallest representation) were young women.

Far more than their brothers, the young women in this study say that they intend to move out for a time, if only to complete education. In this research, young women tended to use both a more global reference, and tell clearer, more elaborate stories about identity. This ties in with reports from their school teachers – that the young women were (on average) much more interested in the outside world, adept both at written work and articulate in class.

Some interesting things will happen later in relation to these stories. Not all of those who want to leave town will go, and two of those who were determined stay will be unceremoniously moved-on by changed circumstances. There is also a sense in which the stories that individuals told in interviews were some of the many that could have been told by the same respondents in a different interview, on a different day (see Yates 1996). However, the stories represented here were respondents' preferred offerings in this time and place, shaped within the context of our encounters.

### **Planning destinations and routes (goals and means)**

These individuals are travellers in time and social space. Their 'trajectories' are the courses which they will chart through the social world (see Berger and Berger 1975). An individual's story is like a travel plan. Respondents' travel plans have different qualities.

In order to have a travel plan, one needs to have firstly, clear *goals*, and secondly a basic understanding of the *means* (ways, routes) necessary to reach these goals. These are being drawn from the individual's known world. For those 'exploring' and 'settling', the goals have become relatively clear: 'I feel pretty good about my future' says Tony. 'Living in Geeveston, getting a good job, settling down...

become a builder ... one day be self-employed.' (1:1). Meanwhile Sandra is planning to become a vet: 'in a rural sort of area' (2:5). Among respondents who are 'exploring' and 'settling', the means to these goals are also clearly stated:

(Sandra 2:3)

Something like 6 years at Uni. I think you actually have to go to Melbourne to do it. And umm, yeah you have to have really high percentage for school work when you leave college, I think.

(Tony 1:1)

I reckon I'll get a job, fairly soon after I leave school - perhaps by February... I know a couple of builders. First you need to go to college and get a proper apprenticeship. Or you can start as a builders labourer and learn as you go along. I think that I'm more likely to do it that way. I already know a bit 'cos I helped a bloke from around here to build a whole house.

Also, those 'exploring' and 'settling' are usually armed with contingency plans:

(Sandra 2:2)

They tell me you have to be really smart for that, so if I can't get through that, what I'll actually do, is I'll be a veterinary nurse, and you only have to go to college and then you do TAFE and then you sort of learn on the job.

(Tony 1:1-2)

If those things fall through, then there's forestry, or the fish-farm... or the sawmill. I'm going there for work experience - driving machinery and stuff. Got some good friends there too... Also Mum's dad - go out with him some weekends for abalone. I could work with him.

It appears that the amount of effort put into detailed planning is directly related to the individual's sense of their own agency – their relative autonomy, power, or ability to make things happen:

I'd do the courses that I needed to, to like get [my scores] up... 'Cause I really, I don't want to spend 6 years at uni just to find out I can't do it, so I'd give it all I could to like make sure I got there. (Sandra 2:19)

The converse is also true:

If you want to get a job you might as well kiss the moon. (Lisa, conversation, September 1995).

No, I don't really think about my future much. Because it's weird. You're planning ahead but you don't know what's going to happen. So you get disappointed eventually. (Phoebe 1:1)

These sentiments are revealed in both 'retreating' and 'wandering' stories.

'Retreating' young people are not telling stories about goals and means. Rather, in these stories, *avoiding disappointment, pain or risk*, appears to be 'the good'. 'I'm staying here 'cos it's safe here.' (Lisa, same conversation). The student who said these words had been ostracised by her peers for years, but moving outside her known world was an even bigger threat. 'Retreating' stories often also involve a collective and stationary sense of 'we'. Articulation of individual identities is not strong - but there is safety in numbers. These are the students who ask to be interviewed in pairs, and who will later leave the study.

Finally, 'wandering' young people will tell of a destination but be unable to provide detail about how they will get there. William hopes: 'to become a computer operator.' How? William does not think much about his future: 'Nup. Fair while yet.'. He is in the final weeks of year 10. 'What are your chances?' 'Not good'. This is a story of fantasy or pseudo-plan, with ideas that are not at all grounded within the individual's social context. With fantasy, ideas have no real-world connection with articulated means or with social networks. It almost looks like the periodic entertainment of other-worldly ideas (opiate for the masses?). This pattern seems to have a dialectic operation, as both a response to individual powerlessness and a cause of further powerlessness. The role of mass media in the maintenance of this pattern will be explored later (in this chapter and in chapter 8).

## The uses of networks

Networks shape kids' ideas about the world. Social interactions enrich the individual's story with shared meanings and thicken stories with new ideas. Social relationships both supply ideas about goals, and supply ways of attaining them (for example practical help, ideas, etc.). Even weak ties are fulfilling this role (see Granovetter 1982).

Among these young people, broader networks are linked to broader world-views. Many of those 'exploring' are young people who have moved into Geeveston, or first generation migrants from elsewhere. They or their families have external contacts, whose ideas they are accessing. These are classed patterns. For example Pete's networks extend globally, tying in with his family's recreation patterns (ie. they travel). Observations in homes and interviews with parents reveal that those parents (usually, but not always) have similar orientations to their children (Wierenga 1995). Parents who commute to the city also make family friends there. Mel's elite sport involvement (and networks) in the city means her parents need to have the resources to support her in this. The role of families in resourcing their kids will be explored further in chapter 8.

Geeveston's young men and young women have quite distinct networking practices. The girls are very active researchers of the other women around them. 'What did she do?' 'How did she do it?' 'Is it working for her?' 'What does this mean for me?'

I want to be just like my step-sister... she works part-time but she has a family and she's got time to spend with the family... I think secretary is the kind of job where I could do that too. (Bronwyn 1:10).

Young women are also active researchers of future options outside Geeveston. This is related to a dislike of local options and cultural definitions of both good work and femininity. Note, though, that they do not mention gender or being a young woman, but they talk about the things that are valued and valuable, and the things that are to be avoided (see below) and it is *these* definitions that differ on the basis of gender.

Work within Geeveston, as in other studies (Willis 1979; Connell et al. 1982) is closely linked with definitions of masculinity, and is a source of identity or 'vocation' for young men. As part of this research in 1995, all grade 7 and 8 students at the local high school completed an essay entitled: 'What I will be doing in 20 years time'. Overwhelmingly, young men expressed manual work as *the* main feature of their imaginings. By way of contrast, the young women's essays are more likely to feature friends, careers, families, and life-styles.

A different cultural orientation in women is driven not just by parents but by everything they see and hear. Cultural messages are carried not just in words but in action. Although 'politically correct' ideas have infiltrated the town (I could only find a couple of young men to tell me that housework was women's work) day-to-day practice is different. Statistics from the most recent census (ABS 1997a) reveal that 'skilled vocational' qualifications relate to men (34 out of 40), and 'basic vocational' likewise, to women (11 out of 11). Here, as elsewhere in Australia, women are still domestic servants. The message and role-modelling that young people receive is that in Geeveston, men can work for identity, but that women have jobs out of necessity to supplement family income. If they stay in town, spiels from school and media to empower women are potentially rendered moot by the limited local options available. However, girls actively respond to the social conditions which they experience (Taylor 1993). They are, corporately or separately, constructing other interpretations of this picture, and resistance to the patterns that they see: 'No, I wouldn't work at (Fish Place) - Mum wouldn't let me. She says its not a good job, I can do better. Anything I can git apart from that.' This comes across strongly, irrespective of class: 'They've [my parents have] encouraged us to keep away from the apples - thought that we can do a bit better.' (Kelly 1:5), or 'Bullshit, no way! Nuh, I wouldn't work over there!' (Nell 1:3). Among the few 'settling' young women, working in a shop looks 'Ok' – and there is no analysis of the precarious nature of this position. In contrast to their male counterparts, the young women are overwhelmingly intending to go on to complete their education (year 11 and 12).

It is interesting that in our conversations, the mantra: 'there's no-where to go and nothing to do' only comes from the mouths of young women. Superficially, we could take this as applying to recreation options. It is, though, a 'good call' on the



existential plight in which they find themselves. In terms of employment options, and in terms of cultural expectations, barring friendship, motherhood and wifedom there *is* no vocation for them in Geeveston.

### **Networks and access to ideas**

Information and ideas are gathered on a '*need to know*' basis, depending upon what individuals are doing.

Respondents who are 'exploring' are drawing on a wide range of sources (family, school, peers, community, mass media). Either because they, family members, or mentors have moved in, their networks stretch well beyond 'The Valley', and contact with new, diverse ideas is frequent.

Those 'settling' are also drawing from many sources, but their information is locally bound, and more homogenous. Teachers are sources of ideas from outside The Valley, but because these young men are focussed on staying here, any information about the outside world is understood but shrugged off as 'not relevant to me'. Ross will tell me that he knows that the best way to get a job is to go to College, but that it makes no difference to him because he is going to drive a 'fork-truck'. Definitions of self are anchored here and engaged only in narrowly defined information-searches.

'Retreating' individuals seem to be not so much seeking information as protection. The peer group is useful to this end. Shared stories are defences to external attack. They involve themes such as 'why we're not going to risk it'. Nell's interview earlier was an example of this.

Respondents who are 'wandering' seem to be making use of mass media as the key or sole sources of their own stories (this will be explored further in chapter 8). Perhaps images of cities and the promise of a glamorous existence are a welcome contrast to current conditions. Whatever the reason, this has some serious implications in terms of ability to follow-through. Laura is in grade 10 and delighted to recount that: 'there's only 55 more days of school! Can't wait. Never going back to school again...'. Laura wants to be a model. So how do you go about becoming a

model Laura?. 'S'pose I should think about it a bit.' (1:2). She does not know anyone who has become a model; her acquaintances are all local but estranged. All of the interactive social sources of information mentioned earlier are useful in that they can provide ideas, both about goals, and about the social means (practical help, contacts, ideas grounded in circumstance) to attaining those goals. TV, as a non-interactive source, does not do this. A goal with no means remains a *fantasy*.

Most respondents make statements about 'me' (the type of thing I could do / not do) about 'us' or reference-groups, and 'the kind of thing that people like me do'. The content of these statements corresponds to broad and narrow world-views or life-experience. The ability to do this *at all*, though, corresponds to a clarity of stories about 'past, present, future, and me'. These things both have an impact on the individual's ability to absorb different possibilities into their own understanding of the future.

### **Different histories of trust**

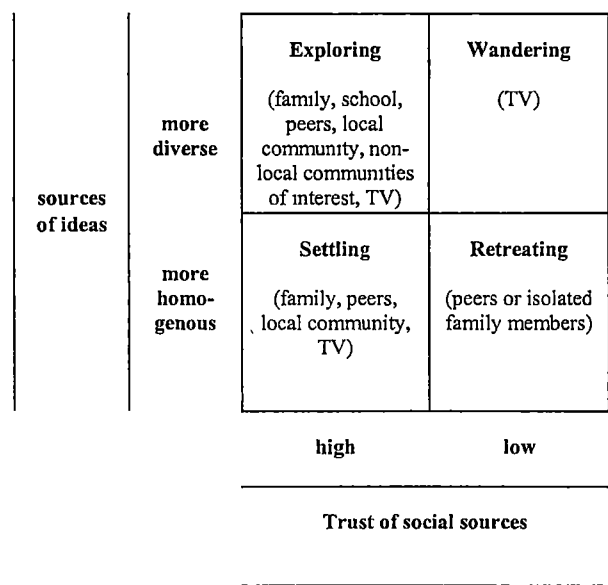
Individuals have learned these specific ways of operating amidst the socially located conditions of their own histories. Three factors are important here. The first is *trust* in some stories about reality – and about their *own ability* to make sense of the things that they see.

Secondly, *trust* of certain *significant others* and their stories - their input - is important. If, in early years, young people learn that they can not trust family members or significant others, then they will not readily place trust in generalized others (ie. other social sources of ideas and information). Laura, ('model') does not spend much time with anyone after school: 'Just keep to myself, mostly, watch TV and sleep.'. Her siblings all live locally but she's lost touch with most of them. Significant others include: 'Mick (boyfriend), cat, dog, sister, horse'. She used to ride a lot but: 'Dad sold my horse when I was at school one day.' (Laura 1:4).

As much as anything else, teenage networking is about accessing the stories of 'people like me'. If relationships are trusted, these become useful sources of ideas. If alienated from social sources, the related information is not useful, and not used. Figure 3 shows the sources that are 'referenced' by young people when they tell their

stories (eg. ‘My Mum said...’, ‘at school we did...’). It shows how those ‘exploring’ and ‘settling’ acknowledge a wide range of social sources, the former more diverse, the latter more localized. ‘Retreating’ respondents are mentioning few social sources. ‘Wandering’ ideas are globally sourced, but completely disconnected from real-world networks and possibilities.

**Figure 3: Respondents’ use of social sources of information**



A third important factor is the *availability of coaches, mentors, and translators*. These are the people that *translate* ideas to be understood in the child’s language - the people that say: ‘this is relevant to you’, or encourage engagement: ‘you would be very good at this’. They provide a consistent source of ideas about the world, and probably more importantly, these relationships help to shape and define the young person in their own eyes. We use conversation in order to construct an understanding of the world, and the self (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Young people who do not converse cannot construct.

A story like Laura’s demonstrates the absence of mentors. Sometimes, though, the limitation is not the absence of mentors, but the limited world-view of these mentors. So when the next door neighbour tells Ben that: ‘You should be able to get a job as a mechanic without going to college’, he is believed. The young people in this study are more likely to listen to someone trusted than someone qualified. This hits the young men the hardest as they are networking mostly locally, and conversing least.

## **Implications - what does all of this mean?**

Storying is social practice, and social practice differs on the basis of significant social divisions, like class and gender. Different practices are both a function of social structure, and a daily re-creation of same. In the lives of these respondents this is clearly the case. It is cultural patterns like the ones highlighted in this chapter that reproduce and re-create social inequalities in a new generation. Gender can be best understood not as two categories of people, but as ongoing relations among people. Likewise social class can be seen, not so much as about social categories or ownership of certain things, but as intrinsic to patterns of practice - *what people are doing* with resources and relationships (Connell et al. 1982).

The patterns replicate themselves within lives but also within the community. Young people are not just absorbers of local culture but *co-creators* of it. Leaving Geeveston, or not leaving, will have a significant impact. Those who leave will take their optimism, networks, new learnings and exploring cultural practices with them. Those who choose not to go on to further education become role models for younger people. This is a self-perpetuating pattern.

Stories are *political*, and they entail power. How we tell the story shapes action. In the creation of a future, so much rests upon the ability to draw on a history. Scattered dots do not make a line. Individuals' stories, and their practices of storying, pave the way for life-choices, negotiations, and engagement with future options. These things are *exponential* in nature. They can be thought of as a *career*, with each choice requiring further investment into an identity (Becker 1963). Conversely, each choice can remove the individual further from other options, other social networks, and other definitions of self.

'Exploring' respondents are the ones who are talking about availing themselves of the highest number of different future options. By leaving The Valley (even for a time) they will further increase their networks, contacts and ideas, but also their geographical understanding and their resource-base from which they can tell their stories of past and of future - in short, *expand their cultural universe*.

The situation of 'settling' respondents is more precarious than their 'exploring' sisters. By planning locally only, these young people make themselves *subject to local conditions*. 'Settling' respondents are aspiring to the traditional, male, working-class rural jobs of their fathers and grandfathers, which are fast being removed from rural towns. In this way, they are playing by the rules of the game, but the rules have been changed without their consent. This generates heartbreak and hostility. Those who have placed trust in the old rules are locked in and may lose strength fast. This pattern in particular has great social significance in Australia at the moment. The rise of political parties like One Nation demonstrates similar elements of despair about social change in rural areas and mistrust of the outsider.

'Wandering' and 'retreating' are both unhelpful strategies in that they are *re-active* rather than *pro-active* about future options. 'Exploring' and 'settling' respondents have (albeit with limited scope for some) claimed 'captaincy of their craft' and are making plans for the journey, while those 'wandering' and 'retreating' are at the mercy of social forces, blown about by wind and tide (Wierenga 1995; 1999).

Those who have a basic working-assumption of a benevolent world are searching for '*best practice*' ideas. Meanwhile, local experiences of a hostile world are leading others to search for *least-worst options* - ways of hiding (retreating) and escaping or fleeing (wandering). Later chapters will reveal how this is not helpful in terms of individual life-chances.

Finally, these patterns, these four cultural orientations, may be both exponential and political, but they are *not determinate*. As later chapters show, young people's lives change. However, re-interviews with the same respondents in 1997 and 1999 would reveal just how deeply individuals' stories - and their practices of storying - were enmeshed in other significant patterns in their lives. That is, understanding respondents' practices of storying is integral to understanding the ways they would 'negotiate' significant changes (chapter 5); their different ways of 'engaging' with the institutions that manage their trajectories (ch. 6); the different types of 'resources' that they were able to draw upon as they went about the process of making lives (ch. 7); and how this was all happening in the context of ongoing relationships to self and to others (ch. 8). The conceptual scheme introduced in this chapter offers a way of exploring and making sense of each of these other significant themes.

## **5. *Negotiating changes***

October of 1997 marks the end of year 10 for one school class at Geeveston District High school. The 16 students in this class have been involved in this research project from the beginning. The moment of leaving grade 10 is a 'moment of truth' – a particularly significant moment in time. During the summer of 1997-'98 each respondent must make sense of many new things and negotiate very significant changes. This chapter explores how members of this group are differently negotiating this time, this set of changes, and some of the implications of these things for our understandings about the process of making a life.

In the following pages I will set the scene – both practically in terms of the significance of staying on in education past grade (year) 10, and conceptually in terms of the language of 'choice' (ie. the choice to stay on) and how we might better frame the things we can see. Interviews with respondents in the lead-up to finishing high school show that this moment means a variety of things to different individuals, and that as a consequence it is being approached in a variety of ways. The chapter goes on to explore respondents' different practices of negotiating the changes over the summer of 1997-89. The cohort, at this moment form a 'cohort-case-study'. Their movements and the stories that they tell shed some light on significant issues: young people's life choices; the out-working of history and context in how different choices are being made; and also most fundamentally, youth agency and social structure.

The focus in these next two chapters (5 and 6) revolves principally around all respondents' early negotiations with school and work options. This is a limited focus, for a limited time. As other writers have pointed out, youth research has tended to be instrumentally oriented, with particular emphasis on problems – and as a result much of the previous work has focussed on education and employment (Dwyer et al. 1999; Wyn and White 1998). The down-side of such a focus is a compartmentalising of issues (Wyn and White 1998). Young people are not just students who become workers. Other transitions are equally as important (Looker 1996; Looker and Dwyer 1997) but are more difficult to systematically study (Dwyer et al. 1999). Examples of other significant transitions would be moving out of home,

changing towns or having friends leave, moving in with friends, forming significant partner relationships and having children.

However, what happens at this moment of leaving school is very significant in terms of individuals' lives and life-chances. Firstly, where individuals go now shapes where they can go next - opening up or closing down other options (Holden 1992). Secondly, education and work are pivotal ways in which young people are connected to their communities (Wyn and White 1997). Thirdly young people's practices of engagement in work and education are both shaped by, and shaping, their other social engagements; these are interconnected (Looker and Dwyer 1997). As such, the shift from compulsory schooling to other commitments *is* centrally enshrined in the whole process of making a life. Here I am seeking to present a holistic picture that does not ignore these other transitions, and other significant relationships (or the distinct absence of them). Later chapters will also broaden significantly beyond a school-to-work focus.

### **Staying on at school**

One decade ago, the Finn report (1991) set targets of 95% percent of 19 year-olds to have finished year 12, have a post-school qualification, or be in formally recognised education programs, by 2001. That young people should stay on beyond the compulsory years of education, to year 12 has been a policy pushed by Governments of either traditional persuasion. The previous Labor Government, through the 'Working Nation' white paper claimed: 'We will never again return to a world where large numbers of jobs are available for unskilled young workers.' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994:89). Under the current Liberal Government, The Youth Allowance Scheme, brought into effect on the first of July, 1988 means that receiving ongoing support also entails being open to continuing education.

There is good reason for this emphasis. Recent Australian research shows that those who do not complete year 12 in the-mid 1990's experienced longer periods of unemployment than their counterparts a decade earlier (Lamb et al. 2000).

However, such policy measures are quick to establish the responsibility of individuals to be trained and job-ready, rather than the responsibility of other parties

to provide work. Education and training now play a significant role as 'holding tanks' for the young unemployed, and welfare payments are essentially tied to an education and training agenda (Wyn and White 1997).

Especially in the context of a lack of local work, Geeveston's young people have been encouraged by their teachers to continue education. Respondents' interpretation of this message depends very much on the kind of understandings about education shared at home. These young people grow up in a town where a minority of people have 'gone on'. However, this cohort is growing up in a changing climate. Each year a few more go on, and each year a few more plan to go on.

Recent Australian research shows that rural and remote students have lower participation rates, less consistent attendance, and poorer academic performances than their urban peers. The average year 12 retention rate for boys in rural and remote areas is only 54% compared with 63% in capital cities, while for girls it is 66%, and 74% in capital cities (Sidoti 2001).

For rural Tasmanian students, decisions about whether to continue education beyond grade 10 have been complicated by two things. Firstly, within the public (government) school system in Tasmania (unlike some other states) grade 11 and 12 are 'college', and separated from grades 7-10 as a different institution in a different location, with different rules, social dynamics, staff, subjects and expectations. Tasmania's comparatively low retention rates beyond year ten may particularly be a result of rural students being unprepared for this different world (see: Abbott-Chapman et al. 1992; Cunningham et al. 1992). Secondly, until recent developments (year 11 is now offered in some district high schools), going on with education has meant either long daily travel or leaving town. Practical considerations are significant (eg. time on the bus), but as respondents stories will indicate, there are other far more salient factors influencing individuals' movements.

### **Young people's choices**

At face value, this chapter is set to be simply about respondents' choices. Emerging from social theory and other youth research, though, are caveats warning that this way of framing the issues could be almost as problematic as useful. Issues of 'free



will and determination', 'action and constraint', or 'agency and structure' have been traditional areas of debate in the field of sociology, as well as more recently in youth studies. Tensions exist between focus on the individual volition and broader social patterns.

More specifically, how we understand individuals' movements as determined or free has huge bearing on understandings of individual life-chances. More specifically again, this has a bearing on the ways in which we frame issues of young people making a life. In the field of youth studies, attention has recently been drawn to the ways in which a focus on young people's choices obscures other significant social patterns. The 'paradox of youth' lies in the relationship between the choice or agency of the individual and the structural conditions which for many 'preclude the attainment of adult social goals' (Wyn and White 2000:1).

Within the literature, White and Wyn (1998) point to the predominance of either 'deterministic' or 'voluntaristic' understandings of youth. Both ends of this spectrum are characterized by static, uni-dimensional conceptions of youth – primarily as an age category:

The categorical concept of youth serves to perpetuate the popular myth that all young people are perched on the brink of an equally promising adult life, and that all they have to do is make the right choices for themselves. (White and Wyn 1998:18)

Often youth are portrayed as individuals whose lives are determined - either biologically or psychologically. This is most clearly articulated within developmental psychology (Wyn and White 1997). The different versions portray youth as a developmental stage on the way to adulthood. Physical and psychological maturation are accompanied by a set of identifiable and universal developmental tasks which, if completed well, lead to normal adulthood. Resulting definitions of 'adolescence' are both externally imposed and based upon questionable assumptions: of growing up as an individual journey; of predetermination by psychological and physical processes; and the ultimate resolution in terms of character or lifestyle normality or abnormality (ie. deviance) (White and Wyn 1998). White and Wyn (1998:319) suggest that the study of young people is still dominated by this approach

and that it 'provides a framework for research on individual differences, deviance, giftedness, standardised testing and 'at risk' youth'. At best these approaches ignore questions about social context and young people's agency, and at worst they can be patronising and disempowering when they are used to justify interventions that are designed simply to control young people.

At the other end of the spectrum, youth are seen to be powerfully constructing their own realities, but again with scant attention paid to the ways young people are positioned materially within the social world (White and Wyn 1998). One example of a voluntaristic approach would be the 'cultural studies' literature, where young people are seen as creators of social reality and:

... the stress is on cultural dynamics and process, which exist in a virtual, free-floating state, where young people actively pick and choose what kind of (postmodern) subject they are for the moment. (White and Wyn 1998:321).

While this perspective means that there is a lot to say about cultural expression and lifestyle, there is little room for discussion about different living conditions, about opportunity and constraint.

Another – and very relevant to this chapter – body of writing which shows this emphasis is the 'youth transitions' literature. Focus is upon the transition to adulthood, upon individual 'pathways' to goal of becoming adult. Young people are again seen as inventing and reinventing themselves, but this time through educational choices. The underlying assumptions here are similar to cultural studies in that the journey is individualized, with clear start and end-points, and success is about taking advantage of what the system has to offer (White and Wyn 1998). Despite surface voluntarism - both of the latter approaches also offer a very limited understanding of choice and / or agency:

In both the broad areas that we have canvassed here young people's agency is conceived in a very limited sense of making choices against a backdrop in which social forces which generate inequalities are muted...

there is generally tacit acceptance of a social order in which inequality is seen as inevitable, and hence it remains unchallenged. (White and Wyn 1998:323).

Rather than the dominant voluntaristic or deterministic perspectives, White and Wyn suggest a different approach – a contextual approach – one that focuses directly upon the interplay between young people and society. By placing social practice and the development of social practices at its centre, this approach allows the researcher to explore how agency is played out within particular structural conditions (White and Wyn 1998).

In this study a contextual approach is being claimed. That is, the research gaze is directly upon respondents' different practices at a significant moment, and also upon the histories and social conditions which surround their different practices.

### *Choosing 'pathways'*

Through recent decades in education and policy, the notion of 'pathways' has framed education policies and the study of young people's movements from school to training to work (Dwyer 1993; Looker and Dwyer 1997). Young people have been seen as responsible for 'choosing' different pathways (Looker 1996). Alongside this, policy and rhetoric is increasingly constructing young people as consumers (Bessant 1996; Wyn and White 1997), once again framing outcomes as a matter of individual choice.

Emphasis on the individual making the right choices or choosing the right pathways has political implications in a time where some pathways resemble '...the road to (no)where' (Holden 1992) and many other alleged pathways look more like 'mosaics' (Abbott-Chapman 1999). For both early school leavers and those who continue, pathways is no longer an adequate metaphor (Dwyer et al. 1998; Wyn 1998). Many of the difficulties encountered by young people who are negotiating futures with work are linked to broader patterns of social change. They revolve around changes in labour and industry, technology, broader patterns of economic rationalization and the globalization of markets. A focus on the individual as responsible, or on their choices, removes the focus from the economic and political

processes by which large numbers of young people are being marginalized and excluded. By placing the responsibility for right choices squarely onto individuals, we overlook the fact that much of what is happening for young people is the result of wider structural and social changes (eg. in labour and industry) (Wyn and White 1997).

Meanwhile research is telling us that most young people live their lives in the knowledge that they continue to have and make choices (Dwyer et al. 1998). Often when young people make decisions about school and work they are feeling a huge burden of personal responsibility (Dwyer et al. 1998; Dwyer et al. 1999).

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue that a cultural ideology of 'individualism' suggests to young people that they alone are responsible for their circumstances. Following Beck (1992) they suggest that in late modernity, risks become individualized. That is, crises and setbacks are understood as personal shortcomings and problems to solve on an individual basis. Individuals, however, are being forced to negotiate risks that are not individual but collective in nature (eg. unemployment). Their circumstances are likely to be much more socially structured - that is, they are outside the control of the individual - than a result of individual action. This is the 'epistemological fallacy' of late modernity (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). As such, late modernity means not the disappearance of class but rather, lack of recognition - its obscurity.

As Furlong and Cartmel suggest, there is a real need to recognise that although an ideology of individualism prevails, the real, material conditions in which people live continue to structure their life chances.

Where research emphasis is placed only on individuals and their choices it is easy to overlook some fairly fundamental social factors (Dwyer et al. 1998). Young people's choices are qualitatively very different (Looker and Dwyer 1997). The nature of the options available to different individuals varies greatly across different axes of social inequality, upon structural conditions like class, gender, race, and upon the different resources which individuals are able to access (Wyn and White 1997).

The most useful framework in which to understand young people's choices is to see them as part of ongoing negotiations between individuals and their social world. The picture that comes back both from fieldwork and from other literature is one of 'negotiated realities' (see Wyn and White 1997; Looker and Dwyer 1997; Dwyer et al. 1999). The concept of 'negotiations' makes sense firstly, in terms of respondents' movements in different directions (ie. negotiating meaningful paths or negotiating obstacles), but secondly in terms of power imbalances in the construction of different arrangements between social agents (ie. negotiating relationships or contracts with significant others and institutions).

This chapter will show that young people are active negotiators, but also that they are very differently placed to engage in these negotiations. Due to the different life-histories and family contexts of respondents, they will be quite differently equipped to negotiate. Having re-framed the issues this way, we can shift our focus to one moment when respondents' trajectories diverge, and then onto some of the different negotiation strategies involved in these divergences.

### **The moment of truth**

In terms of understanding social process, it is important to understand what the end of grade 10 means to respondents. Attention will be paid to some of their explanations first, and a more analytical scheme will be developed later.

For the class of '97 this moment is in some senses a turning point or crisis, in that a large part of 'life as normal' ceases to exist. For respondents, leaving grade 10 coincides with other significant life-changes such as having friends leave town, the emergence of partners, moving out of home, or families moving out of town. It signals a time where respondents find themselves faced with multiple choices to make, including what to do next, how to go about doing it, and who to do it with. *Some* of them say that they are confronted by these changes, but the unfolding events will catch others less prepared. The meaning of the moment is most clearly framed

by respondents' understandings of both what they are leaving and where they are going. These understandings, in turn, have been framed by the context and content of each individual's life.

The class of '97 have lived with the joint blessing and curse of having an intimate home-group, and now they face the joint blessing and curse of leaving it. The stories about this vary between students, depending upon how encircled they felt themselves to be by the group-life, and where they have been in pecking-order. Several though, reveal the complex push and pull associated with branching out beyond this. Alyssa sums up some common themes well:

Oh I guess its' probably like a second home to me this school, I've been around here so long, ....I think I'll make a heap of new friends and that, but they won't really be as good as what I've had here, I mean I've known Mark since we were started - we were in play-group together - we were this big, and how we're all grown-up and he's been like my brother and everything. (Alyssa 5:116-7)

To a point, less intimacy would be welcomed at times:

I really wanted to be, you know, get away from this, and one of the bad things about being at such a small school is that everyone knows what you do, everyone knows every little detail about you no matter how embarrassing or horrible it is, like so at least going to college is going to get away from that. (Alyssa 5:121)

As the end of grade 10 approaches (only weeks away) this grows as a source of ambivalence:

... hmm and there's all these faces and you can't put names to half of them... yeah, sometimes, sometimes people need to get away but at least they're there for you if you need them. (Alyssa 5:121)

In their own way, others are echoing these sentiments:

But we all grew up together and that, got in trouble together... (Simon, 2:16)

Amongst other school years (the class of '95 and '96), interviews are pointing to respondents' quite different lived experience of school. A minority - those 'retreating' - say that they are simply relieved at the idea of having no more school. This small group (female, working class) fit Holden's (1992) description of school 'refugees'. Some others are seeing this as a good opportunity to shake off those that have been 'in my face' for too long. In a small community, antagonisms and patterns of group oppression are hard to escape.

For respondents, meaning is constructed in terms of not just what individuals are leaving but what they are going towards - what comes next. Among those who want to continue their education, as well as planning and dreaming, many are simply grappling with the sheer unknown-ness of what they will encounter on the other side:

Alyssa: Yah I reckon it will, it'll be so strange going to college next year  
- it's such a big place and such a small person.

AW: What do you reckon will be the hardest thing of that?

Alyssa: Yeah, um, probably finding my way around. (Alyssa 5:116)

Going to college evokes fear for several reasons. For example - going from a small and intricately known world to a larger unknown one:

Oh, I get really scared sometimes when I know that I've got to go in to college and stuff like that cause I'm like little, compared to my sister, like Estelle, she's the big - the town person and takes everything on... and I get scared. (Nicolette 1:59)

Siblings and friends are sources of information. Networks provide specific information about dealing with college. However, that world still remains unfamiliar, abstract and 'scarey':

It's really like that's kind of like oh God I've got to go without my friends - it's a bit daunting but I know I have to go ... My sister seems to have, like she's um met really nice friends and that. So that bit's all right, but it's just the part of having to go up to town and stuff like that. (Nicolette 1: 151-2)

From this vantage point, thinking beyond college is even more daunting. Sonia wants to do college 'but not TAFE or Tech' (further vocational education):

Sonia: Hopefully I won't have to because I don't really want to.

AW: How come you don't want to?

Sonia: Cause I, I don't know. It's such a big place, I guess.

'Scarey' is defined in terms of the unknown: an unknown place, unknown friends and unknown demands awaiting them. I ask Nicolette what is 'scarey' about going on to University:

I don't know. Maybe it's the 4 years or the 6 years of more learning or something, I don't know. It's just everyone's says it's hard. Like schooling and stuff, like that. Like people have parties there, but if you want to get like a good job and a good education, you have to work. And that is way different from high school. So, it's scarey. (Nicolette, 1:253)

Fear can be a blockage until there is an over-riding story to which it becomes subordinate:

But I don't know if I could do that... but if I want to do that job, I know I have to. (Nicolette 1:333)

As the more articulate students explain, a large part of what is holding them back from college and other education systems is fear. Less articulate students do not explain in terms of fear, or anything else for that matter. They simply do not explain. As Nicolette shows by her movement over the next 2 years (through college), some respondents can and will, by virtue of their own significant projects be propelled through the barriers created by their fears.



**Figure 4: Facing the moment of truth - different cultural orientations**

Focus	Global	<b>Exploring</b>  Specific but Abstract Launching into the unknown. School and work plans anchored to occupation or area of interest, not specific industry	<b>Wandering</b>  Vague - Going to college: 'you need college to get a job'; Looking for work: often glamorized but ungrounded ideas
		<b>Settling</b>  Specific and locally grounded. local jobs and local industries	<b>Retreating</b>  No plans 'I couldn't really say.'
	Local		
		<b>Specific</b>	<b>Vague</b>
<b>Stories about what I'm doing</b>			

At this point, those with most abstract (non-local, not directly experienced) ideas - ie. those 'exploring' - are also articulating the most uncertainty. If some of the best resourced and most articulate students are dogged by these fears, how are the others managing the shift? Figure 4 contrasts the different patterns, in terms of respondents' cultural orientations. Those 'settling' are facing the moment by naming only the things that are familiar as their future options. For those who plan to stay, familiar things, and tasks they can already do, are most important. Uncertainties are tackled by the naming of familiar industries and jobs in specific workplaces.

In their second interviews, 'wandering' students are still not very specific about futures. The mantra 'you need college to get a job' has made a surprisingly regular appearance. Stokes and Holdsworth (1998:19) also comment on the ready availability of this answer among students - as if the correlation were obvious: 'You need to go to school to get a job'. Most interesting here, though was the mantra being uttered amongst those who could or would not elaborate on this further and were quite clearly putting their energies elsewhere (more on this later). As in chapter 4, not all are able to talk clearly about where they are going. For some (especially those 'retreating' and 'wandering') this is over-shadowed by what they are leaving and the idea of being free of it:

Being at school is like being caged. (Laura, 1:2)

Glad to be rid of the hassle... getting up in the morning and that.  
(William, 2:10)

Probably just as significantly, though, the meaning of the moment is framed by another set of factors: respondents' different understandings about what was required of them at this time; what the end of grade 10 means in terms of their own futures; what they themselves should be doing or worrying about; and the particular onus on them to individually *get it right*.

As they approach the end of grade 10, some feel that the stakes are particularly high at the moment:

Oh I freak out, the idea of choosing a career and I am going to stay with it all me life.... I got to think about how much money I earn and family and wo!... Yeah. It's hard, it is really hard. Yeah and then what subjects you choose are based on that, so you need to do it now and all that. (Max 2, 914:929)

By way of contrast, in the last week of grade 10 I ask Ben why he wants to go to college:

Ben: Um, just give me more experience.

AW: Yeah. Any particular areas that you want to do extra study on?

Ben: Ah, not really just anything I need I s'pose. At the time. (Ben 2:9)

Vague notions about futures do not offer much sense of immediacy and direction about what needs to happen now. Clear stories do. Sonia, confessing that she hasn't always been a vigilant student, explains:

See now I'm just starting to wake up and think: "Oh now, I've only got 2 years left." (2:33)

'Now' only becomes significant in the context of her clear story about what she wants to do in the future. The relevance of her move to college, in the terms of her own stories, leads to resolve:

I've only got year 11 and 12. I don't really want to go to Tafe or tech or anywhere like that, I just want to do the best I can at college... (10:33)

Now – the end of grade 10 - is framed quite differently by respondents because of the different stories about the future that they bring to this moment. Respondents' stories and 'the meaning of now' (more generally) will be explored in greater detail in chapter 6. Here, it suffices to say that for some this is a time of intense activity, for others it seems no more intense than usual.

### **Different negotiating practices**

Last chapter, when we focussed on aspirations, we could only talk in terms of those who had clear goals and means (a plan and a project) and those who did not. From this vantage point it was only two of the four cultural orientations (settling and exploring) that could be said to exercise *any* kind of agency. The question was left hanging - so what are the others *doing*?

When we add differently embodied (lived out) negotiation practices to individuals' stories, some other things start to clarify.

The class of '97 is a distinctive cohort, with its own social and cultural practices (ie group dynamics). The class prided itself on its togetherness and its abilities to 'group think' and respond. It was these qualities that made them both very inward-focussed and very hard to handle as a group (infamous). The end of grade 10 is 'A Moment of Truth'; From the outside it seems as if everybody must make their *own* tracks (ready or not). At the Leaver's Dinner, organized by the group for the group, an emotional speech by the class captain galvanizes the sentiment of everybody - this was the best class ever - and from this moment there is no going back.

Over the summer of '97-98, though, individuals are employing some very distinct negotiation strategies or patterns of practice. These include:

- Plan and Project;
- Negotiation by Proxy;
- Flee;
- Social cluster movements;
- Default Movements.

These patterns of practice can offer some insights into the complex and differentiated transition processes taking place at this time. Each pattern is worth exploring in turn.

### *Plan and project*

'Plan and project' is a new name for a pattern that will look familiar from chapter 4. Its characteristics include clear goals, and clear means (global or local). At this point, since these individuals already have some ideas about what they want to do, emphasis is not so much upon goals, but getting the means right:

AW: And, so when you get to the whole thing of deciding which college to go to, what's, what's the thing that will decide you about that?

Mel: Oh, I'm just gonna look, look at all of them and then decide which one offers me the best courses for what I want to do. So ... if I can get 3 courses that I want to do in one school then 2 at the other, then I'll choose the one that offers me the best.

AW: Even if it's further travelling?

Mel: Yeah. (Mel. 2, 445:461)

I think I am doing Maths, English, Physics, Electronics, Information Technology and Auto Maintenance.... I'm not really good at English, I'm standard Maths and the job that I want to do has high demands on Physics and Maths. So I've got to do them. (Max 2, 643:663)

At the point of leaving grade 10 this *plan and project* pattern involves the young person directly interacting with representatives of employment or education systems. These could be either 'global' (outside 'The Valley') or 'local' (within 'The Valley'). The *individual is lone negotiator*, although they almost always have *allies* who *coach* in decision-making and *facilitate* the process in other ways (eg. going with them to enrolment day, driving, research). On the part of the respondent, any anxiety at leaving the familiar places and faces is funnelled into *researching* options (networks, newspapers, agencies, course-counsellors, pamphlets), into *anticipating* obstacles, *stock-taking* their own position, resources, abilities, chances (as above), and into *imagining* possibilities.

This presents a very *active* way of negotiating futures. It also involves the individual being very involved or *engaged* with the whole process of *making a future*. Central questions, self-directed, are: 'what are my best options?' and: 'what should I be doing now?'. Allies assist by asking and re-framing these questions in the light of their own wisdoms and their own histories of exposure to the world. For the respondent, the answers to these questions are fairly central to lived experience. They become priorities and are articulated as such. Other more peripheral questions are answered in line with them (eg. to paraphrase Sonia: I'm not down at the beach with my friends this summer because I'm getting a part-time-job, so I can get a car, so that when I finish school I can go to work in town). In the light of their plans – where they want to go and the real-world options for getting there - *life is about time-in-motion projects*. *The key issue is therefore one of accessing and making use of resources to those ends*.

### *Negotiation by proxy*

This pattern of social practice presents some direct contrasts to the one above:

Mark: Um, Dad drives a Mobil truck and it's at Mobil (Huonville). This fella rang up Dad and asked him did I want to do an apprenticeship with a month's trial? So I said yeah. Give it a try.

AW: Yeah, so you didn't even have to do anything?

Mark: No, I didn't even know anything about it. (Mark 2, 389:396)

It is only at the time of leaving grade 10 that *negotiation by proxy* is becoming visible at all. This is because it does not exist within and through respondents' own stories and practices, but within *group practice*. As such, it is far less individually-driven or self-contained, resting entirely upon the benevolence of, and reliability of, family and local networks. This is different to the previous strategy because allies take a far more front-line role in negotiations - sorting it out for the kid. Within this culture, emphasis is on less talk and more action. As one mother explained: 'You have to give them direction'. Allies are usually parents, but can be family friends. Central questions involve 'what are his best chances?' (this strategy seems to only involve young men) and 'what can *we* do now?'. Often these strategies will exclude continuing education because this is not one of the things familiar to these networks.

This presents a different kind of agency, a collective process, a *clan-based* creativity. It is a different cultural prototype that has worked very well for generations. It contrasts starkly to the more individually-centred, self-contained, system-familiar and universalistic model discussed above. This is a class-based difference in family practice, and it will be explored further in chapter 8. Initially, rather than individuals engaging in making their own futures, this strategy involves others engaging *on their behalf*. The rationale for action tends to be in clan-and-community-based stories rather than simply individual ones (eg: 'They're alright.'; 'We are doing alright.'; and 'We always look after our own.'). Referring back to earlier interviews, comments that had initially looked like respondents' vagueness and ineptness - at planning and talking about their futures - can now be seen in a new light. *The key issue in this strategy is not personal project management, but solidarity and social connection.*

### *Flee*

This pattern will also look familiar from last chapter. While some are very engaged in negotiating their way *towards* certain options (eg. a chosen vocation, career, or life-style), others explain retrospectively that their movements have been very much structured by the need to *get away from* certain situations (eg. a violent home-life): 'Got me out of there, anyway' (Beth: 2). At the time there is not a lot of language for what is going on, but central issues are about harm-minimisation. Leaving school can be about keeping the peace at home (fitting in, helping out) or getting the

resources together to get away from home (eg. money, boyfriend or pregnancy). *The key issue, therefore is safety and survival.*

Other research with early school leavers has found also that movement can be fuelled by desire to get away. In the cases of such 'refugees' there is often little thought for what comes next (Holden 1992). Lack of forward projecting means these respondents are some of the least equipped to make sense of their next set of arrangements. As with other patterns of crisis management, this *flee* pattern often involves a rapid sequences of changes (eg. leave town / come back; leave home / come back; working / not working; at school / stopped). As such it sits in direct contrast to the strategies listed above, which have more orderly and cumulative sequences of action. This pattern is also characterized by the young person's *lack of allies*.

#### *Least resistance / default*

Some respondents are following similar patterns of practice, but neither now nor later is it clear in their stories what they are fleeing from. For whatever reason, these respondents have little desire or available attention to plan where they are going. This pattern is characterized by either a lack of adult allies, or a lack of shared understandings / consensus with those adults who say that they are trying to be allies. Central questions revolve around 'what do I have to do' and 'what is going to be the least uncomfortable'. This looks like the most passive way of negotiating futures. *Negotiating futures* is actually beyond the point, because the key issue seems to be about responding to life *now* (see chapter 6 for a further exploration of this). As such, this involves a *re-active* rather than a *pro-active* stance. Directions are found on the basis of what is left when the worst options are ruled out, or whatever just happens anyway. So Phoebe chose her smaller college on this basis:

'Hobart's for druggies, Elizabeth [college] is I don't know I don't like it there (you been there?) No I just don't like the people there, Friends [private college] and that are too expensive'... (Phoebe, 3:3)

Rather than a path of best options, this becomes a path of least resistance. Often it entails just ending up somewhere without much idea of what could be valuable or relevant in that move.

### *Social cluster movements*

This is the third pattern of practice that only becomes visible through praxis (in practice rather than in conversation). It looks like *Least Resistance*, but in practice, on the ground, it has a *collective* element that seems to be central and probably should not be ignored:

Simon: I hate holidays, there's nothing to do.

AW: Really. You prefer school?

Simon: ... No, I hate school, but I would rather be with my friends and that every day. (Simon 2:20)

At the point of leaving grade 10, *social cluster movements* involve going to great lengths to stick together with certain key others (usually peers, but sometimes particular family members). Colleges and course details, or job arrangements are sorted out in this light:

I want to go there 'cos Sarah's going there. (Kylie 2:4)

This is a pattern of practice that is probably most likely to be criticised as short-sighted or illogical by outsiders. Sonia, in a later interview, is being insider-ethnographer among her peers. Independently she has made sense of it in this way:

It's like with um, one friend, she's always had somebody with her like she won't do anything on her own - like she's always got to have someone with her. She won't even ring up somebody to ask about something like - Centrelink - she wanted to get a job Purity [Woolworths] summertime - and she said: 'Do you want to come, do you want to come?' and I said: 'No I don't want to work there 'cos I've got this other thing lined up' and, she didn't go. She didn't go 'cos she didn't have anyone to go with. (Sonia, 3:12)



This pattern does not seem to be simply about high levels of trust of these significant others. Rather it is more related to respondents' low levels of confidence in their ability to go alone, to interface with the world and or its institutions on their own. Kylie later says emphatically of her own negotiations: 'I trust no one' (3:13). But like geese who can fly in the slipstream of the other, kids who are less certain of their own next moves can move in tandem. This seems to take far less energy than the investment required to 'go it alone' anywhere else. There is also a lack of adult allies that are (avail)able to make sense of these things with them. *The key issue, therefore is peer connection.*

Although social cluster-movements are collective practices, they are unlike the *proxy* pattern in that they function without the traditions, wisdoms, networks or inter-generational life-experiences (grounded stories) of the clan and community-based practices. This pattern also does not necessarily equate to high levels of agency or engagement in the *formal* task at hand. Again, while some others have found for themselves the *best* options, these young people appear also to have sought out the *least-worst*, but *unlike their (least-resistance) peers above, the worst thing is not uncomfortable options, but being left alone.* We find reasons for being at school couched in vague terms, and those engaged in both *social cluster* and *default* movements (see above) were most likely to simply say:

You need to go to college to get a job.

This statement is superimposed on their other stories, and has few or no points of connection with their other day-to-day activities, focuses or dreams.

### **Negotiation practices and youth agency**

The patterns listed above are the cohorts' visibly different practices for negotiating a moment of significant change. As already mentioned, some patterns had not been evident in previous interviews, or in conversations *because they happen not in cognition and conversation or abstract reasoning but in individual and group practice.*

It seems that not all of the patterns could be called strategies (entailing personal deliberateness), and perhaps not all could be said to entail agency, if agency is 'the exercise of will and conscious action on the part of human subjects' (White and Wyn 1998:315).

However, particularly the *proxy* model serves as a reminder that agency manifests in different ways. As middle-class urban outsider-observers it would be easy to only recognize the agency of self-aware and self-mobilizing articulate individuals - the type who can fit organization culture (*ie. plan and project*). To simply measure more or less of these qualities could lead us to overlook other significant manifestations of agency. Willis (1979) suggested that amongst the group of working class 'lads' that he has studied, that it is *only* at the *group level* that creativity happens (*ie. in this case, the claiming of alternative meanings, resistances to school, and early work-patterns*). In the case of The Valley, a narrow analysis of agency is potentially disrespectful of, or dismissive of, other significant and powerful (in terms of shaping individuals lives) and historically useful cultural patterns of practice. The problem though (also as captured by Willis), is the fit or intersection of these cultural patterns of creativity - these different expressions of human agency - with education, with the available jobs, with the directions of wide-sweeping social change, with future life-chances, and with the institutions that manage young people's transitions.

Some of the patterns of practice that have been detailed above are far more portable, flexible and adaptable to new social settings and circumstances than others. Social clusters can not always stick together. Stories that are practiced only within clans and communities remain intact only within that group. The implications of this will be explored further in chapter 8.

These practices also point to significant differences in history and context. We will explore these next.

### **Patterns of practice, everyday alliances, and young people's different histories**

How are we to respectfully make sense of this diversity in practice? The biggest challenge is that the less articulate, less 'plan and project' oriented respondents also provide many less verbal clues as to what they are actually doing.

Interviews done at the time of school-leaving show that respondents are still, in everyday life, drawing their ideas from very different social sources. Differences are revealed when they answer the question: ‘Where did you learn about that?’. They are even more explicitly revealed in transcripts when we look for the *references* dropped into conversations about individuals’ own basic assumptions and newer thinking - just as researchers refer to other authorities in an academic paper. Through these ‘footnotes’ and ‘endnotes’ to conversations, respondents clearly indicate the key sources from which they are drawing their ideas and theories (world-views):

And Emma says it’s easy, it might be easy for me. (Nicolette 2, 61:64)

Mel: Like, um, I sit at home and, cause like my Mum, like I said to her: “Oh, I’m not going to be able to be a vet.” “Yes, you’ve got it in you to be a vet, course you can do it.” So that, that really made me decide a fair bit too. She knows I can do it. (Sandra. 2, 628:659)

**Figure 5: Histories of trust and negotiation patterns**

sources  of ideas	more diverse	Exploring (family, school, peers, local community, non- local communities of interest, TV) {books}	Wandering (TV peers {isolated family members}), {isolated teachers})
		plan & project	default social cluster
	more homo- genous	Settling (family, peers, local community)	Retreating (peers {or isolated family members})
		most by proxy 1 plan & project 1 default 1 social cluster	social cluster default
		high	low
<hr/> Trust of social sources			

Figure 5 shows the different sources that respondents are *referencing* as they tell their stories. Over time, between interviews 1 and 2, there have been a couple of additions to the lists of social sources accessed by respondents (indicated by {...}), but patterns have stayed basically the same as 2 years earlier (see chapter 4). Some of those who were reacting against families in earlier interviews have now found allies within them. Those ‘exploring’ are still drawing their world-view and ideas from a variety of global sources. Many have now discovered books as authorities in their own right. Those ‘settling’ are engaging with, and listening to a wide range of local sources. Those ‘wandering’ and ‘retreating’ have again found reason to extend their trust in much more limited ways. Here engagement with social others is still happening far more reluctantly.

These different social sources are exposing respondents to very different ideas about the world, very different languages with which to make sense of social life, and very different vocabularies with which they can hear and make sense of the messages of other social sources. This issue will be followed up in chapters 7 and 8.

Within the dramatic changes of leaving grade 10, respondents’ strategies and other patterns of practice are closely reflecting their *everyday alliances*. They are drawing upon the relationships that already existed well before the crisis. Put simply, *individuals are negotiating futures with, and through, and drawing on the assistance of those who are already helping them to make sense of the world.*

In this way, patterns and strategies reflect the biography and cultural milieux of each respondent; it is about histories in families, about relationships with school, with peers, and with communities that are already in place. It is about established patterns of rapport, but probably most significantly, it is about *trust*. At the time of leaving grade 10, these kids are all investing as close as possible to social others that they trust (or mistrust least).

At the end of year ten, *respondents’ movements reflect their different social histories*. Practices of engagement and trust reflect both *biographical* and *group* histories (see chapter 8 for a more detailed account of this). Different histories of trust are manifesting in very different cultural practices on the ground. To *plan and project* via school or jobs is a natural option for some (primarily those ‘exploring’). This is

because what they hear makes sense to them (they are used to listening to and hearing these sources), but also because what the system is saying already rings true for them and their allies. Connell et al. (1982) point to the ways in which parents' own histories with school shapes the ways in which their children can make sense of their communication with the school. In middle class families, the messages of this source come to them in ways that are familiar and understood. In short, they can be heard, they are accessible.

Meanwhile *negotiations by proxy* are like breathing for others (those who are 'settling') and are simply one extension of functioning within the mutuality of that small community.

For some, *social cluster movements* are quite literally the few reliable real-world options that they know. In this light, they are not illogical, but extremely sensible. Practices represent a tenacious attachment to allies (usually peers) and a scramble to hold onto those that they already have. There may be connections between this pattern and the lack of clear pathways that young people find themselves facing. Respondents have just demonstrated that confronting uncertainties and risk 'alone' is just too costly. In the context of a culture and ideology of individualism (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Wyn and White 2000), and in a situation where young people can bear a huge burden of personal responsibility for their own decisions (Dwyer et al. 1998; Dwyer et al. 1999), these practices among less advantaged respondents are illuminating. They speak of survival through collectivity in the midst of some fairly hostile conditions.

To *flee* reflects the will to live, which, if it is an issue, is the *only* issue that matters. *Default* practices are for those who ran out of options. In the context of these different histories of trust, each of these patterns of practice can be recognised as rational, understandable, and to some extent, explainable.

As in chapter 4, lived experience of safety with significant others (or the lack of it) is framing the meaning of relationships with more generalized others. Those whose social world has proved to be full of allies can exercise a freedom of movement and extend trust further, going beyond the boundaries of where they have been before. As suggested earlier in this chapter, this is enabling some to venture right out into

unknown territory. For those who live within a world that has offered them few allies, the practice of clutching on to those that they have is all the more pronounced. *These individuals are negotiating their futures, their upheavals, only with and through those who have already proved to be their allies in the day-to-day process of making a life.* Despite being understandable, this has fairly *significant implications*.

These respondents' practices show clearly that *to offer something to a population of young people does not render it accessible* to all of them. This has fairly significant implications in terms of education. We see here the significance of respecting and listening to individuals' histories - they impact on patterns of practice. Unless we listen well we may be throwing resources away. Homogenizing labels like 'at risk' promise to further diminish understanding and rapport with these individuals.

If these findings are understood more broadly, they also have implications for interventions into young people's other turning points and life-crises. Short-term outsider-designed programs that are issue-specific (eg. youth suicide) and outcome-based, about providing information rather than trust or community-building may not be the best use of resources. Without a history of trust, any service on offer to young people may well be rendered inaccessible to those who most need it.

### **Different negotiation practices meet the real world**

Not surprisingly, the world comes to meet respondents in different ways. What happens next reflects the intersection of these different cultural practices with some broader structural factors that are way beyond respondents' control. All respondents find themselves in a world where social conditions are not ideal - jobs are sparse and entry-level jobs are not what many are looking for. Their experiences reflect wider social patterns - particularly the disappearance of the full-time youth labour market.

The capacity of rural groups to look out for their own has been severely eroded (see chapter 2). On the community's part this does not reflect a lack of commitment to their young, but rather the shrinkage of their own resource base (jobs, services, population etc.). Consequently, communities, particularly rural ones, have a reduced ability to deliver jobs via either the *plan and project* or the *proxy* methods. This means that *default* options and *social cluster movements* become a reality for

individuals who thought that they had other quite realistic plans. It also represents a savage assault, for all involved, on their sense of ability to plan and project, or to look after their own.

For young women, pregnancy is one reliable flee/default option. Although three older respondents have taken this path, none of this year's school-leavers followed.

In the year 1998, some of this cohort would go to college. In the same year, changes to the Federal Governments' Youth Allowance scheme mean that *school becomes the main default option*. This has some interesting consequences in terms of crises, their own meaning systems and stories, but also for respondents' negotiations with education systems in particular (to be explored next chapter).

Nearly all of the class of '97 'make the choice to go on' to college. These are qualitatively very different choices. Respondents are also very differently equipped to make use of what they find there.

- *Social cluster movements* work quite well whilst groups can manage to stay together. One group has had a falling-out, and one student has found herself leaving school and having to re-think her career plans as a result.
- The practice of *negotiation by proxy* leaves kids very poorly equipped in a local world where their allies are losing their resources, or in a global world where these allies are neither present nor experts.

Negotiating risks and insecurities is a messy business. Even good strategies do not mean success in terms of what was planned (2 of those exploring find themselves in trouble early). What happens may not be predictable, but it follows some time-honoured patterns. Those 'exploring' move exclusively via the *plan and project* pattern into jobs and schooling. Those 'settling' have been hit by both the collapse of the youth job market and rural decline. Using the *proxy method* only half of these move into the jobs that they wanted. Most of those 'wandering' end up at college via *social cluster movements and defaults*. Those 'retreating' flee - they make sure that they do not go to college.

At this point, as already mentioned, structural blockages impinge dramatically on some individuals' lives and stories. So much has depended upon where respondents are putting their trust and whether it has been able to come through for them. It did not always come through. Private enterprise lets a few respondents down. Some had planned to work in local industries which have not made or do not have any room for them. To have one's overtures knocked back is a rude shock. Brett reframes and re-stories his own let-downs as we speak: 'I've changed me plans a bit'. While some are holding tenaciously onto their dreams, others find it far more palatable to change their plans to fit the reality that faces them.

To have one's plans stolen is a crisis. Crisis often involves the further loss of story (Strauss 1977). This leaves individuals in a changed position from which to function in the world. It messes with worldviews and it messes with trust. Unemployment and forced school-retention both become structural blockages to those who are 'settling'. These few respondents (perhaps representing many others across the nation?) are experiencing blockages to and separations from their stories, particularly when these have been community-based. When the individual is not the keeper of his or her own story, removal from the community means dispossession. (Issues of the separation of children from their roots, from the custodians of their stories, in the name of improving their life-chances recur in Australian history yet again. And as with last time, there are no simple answers). While some others have held onto their stories and will still talk in interviews about their frustrations, one more ('settling') respondent, at this point, will not be re interviewed, he is not engaging at school... he is now in a story crisis. Away from the keepers of the story, he loses his voice. It will be over a year before we resume contact.

### **Issues of agency: you and whose army?**

Respondents' negotiation practices are structured by the different ways in which they are able to make sense of what is happening around them. Beyond understanding though, beyond cognition and the things that young respondents will explain in interviews, negotiation *practices* reflect individual histories and social contexts in very powerful ways.



If youth agency is 'the conscious actions of young people in relation to the world around them' (Wyn and White 1997:140), to some extent, agency is embodied in both ends of the spectrum - both in the striving for excellence and in the will to live. The agency of the individual, seeking what is best, or seeking what is least-worst, is there like a stamp on each pattern of practice. Among the most oppressed, survival skills are impressive. However, it is the intersection or fit of agency with social conditions, the level of ability to act meaningfully, creatively, and effectively that varies. This impacts on life-chances.

It is the individuals' power to negotiate from within the context of their relationships to the social world, that is differentiated. For this reason, young people's strategies, and for that matter, young people's agency, should not be seen as simply an individual phenomena but also anchored via their social and historical relationships to their context. Agency cannot be reduced simply to 'self-concept' or 'self-esteem'. As some of the 'wandering' students will demonstrate in chapter 6, certain understandings, in a relational and strategic vacuum, are delusions. Nor is agency simply a matter of understandings. It is about knowledge, but also about power and the ability to activate resources (see White and Wyn 1998).

Agency only partly relates to the ways that individuals understand themselves in the context of the social world. It also relates to their different, culturally learned *patterns of doing* (see Connell et al. 1982; White and Wyn 1998) and social practices of drawing on different alliances (in this case examples are using books, using networks, using education). Individuals bring with them, to these negotiations, within their different world-views, understandings, and *embodied within their practices*, the full weight of all of their different social alliances. When negotiating their futures, the social isolate or the respondent with few allies comes to the negotiating table very poor.

### **Qualitatively different choices: reviewing the choice to go on**

What looks like clear-cut choices are actually the manifestations of respondents' ongoing, differentiated practices of negotiation with the social world. As in other research with young people making choices about their futures (eg. Looker and Dwyer 1997; Dwyer et al. 1998), interviews reveal that respondents' choices, are

qualitatively very different, and for some they have become extremely limited. While many individuals have *laid claim* to their post-grade 10 options, other individuals and groups appear to have *been claimed*.

In some cases options are *actively negotiated* by the individual and their allies. In other cases they happen more by *default*. Likewise there is a qualitative difference between those choices that are made *willingly* and those that are adopted *grudgingly* because the options that are really meaningful are blocked off. At the same point, while some are negotiating their way *towards* certain options (eg. a chosen vocation), others explain that their movements have been very much structured by the need to get *away from* certain situations (eg. a violent home-life). The forethought and planning put into these manoeuvres locates individuals very differently in terms of whether their next set of arrangements with institutions are meaningful and safe.

Some are moving on individually, whilst others move on as *social clusters*. Decisions about directions, about which school, even about which subjects, are not necessarily an individual affair. Neither is choice of workplace, or the process of applying for a job. What we see here is often collective rather than individual negotiating. Beyond this point, whether they are *collective* or *individual practices* - and the practicalities of maintaining these, or the portability of these - has powerful implications for individual mobility and individual trajectories. These things are set to have a significant impact on the continuing negotiations.

In February 1998, and for the first time ever, most of the Geeveston school leavers will start college. At face value this represents a victory for government and their retention policies. Also, as statistics show (eg. Lamb et al. 2000) it is a boost for individuals and their chances of employability. Their 'going on' reflects a number of social factors that cannot well be teased out: wanting to; the closeness of the group who have finally attained a critical mass at college and on the bus; the paucity of other options; that messages about continuing education from their school have hit home; and changes in government policy mean that unless they have secured a job or unless their family intend to support them, they have to be there.

We do know though, that individuals have arrived there via different negotiation processes: *individual plan and project*; *social cluster movements*; and *default patterns* as other arrangements have fallen though. Thus the 'choice to go on' is made by the deliberate, the distracted, the desperately hanging on, as well as the confused and the broken-hearted.

This raises some questions about what it does mean to be going on in the current educational climate - not just for those who would rather be elsewhere, but for those who are trying to do their work (staff, students) amidst resources and facilities that are now being stretched further and further.

Statistically in terms of retention into year 11, this class is well above previous years. As already stated, this represents a victory for government retention policies. To compound this ideology further, in later interviews each respondent who goes to college even for a few weeks will retrospectively claim the *choice to be there as their own*. And if policy makers were to ask them, all would say that they were there: '*because you need college to get a job.*' However, interview data has shown that this means very different things to different individuals.

What we do know too, is that on the basis of what is meaningful and who is trusted, individuals are equipped very differently for these transitions. All are being stretched, but for a time some people are operating well beyond the places where they are used to effectively functioning.

### **Reviewing the moment of truth**

Linear and uni-dimensional models of youth transition (eg. school to work, before / after) are less than helpful, in that they tend to overlook the complexity of young people's lives (Looker and Dwyer 1997). They also overlook the significance of social relationships, of social processes, and the differentiated nature of these (Wyn and White 1997). Even among this one small and intimate group from the same community, negotiation practices vary greatly because of the different social contexts and histories from which each individual comes.

These respondents show that this 'moment of truth' is not one moment isolated in time, a before / after experience for which individuals need to be given a lot of information (on a level playing field). Rather the moment is part of biography, and framed by ongoing understandings, social relationships and different alliances. Crises and choices are just one more moment in ongoing negotiations between individuals and their social worlds. For each individual, this moment is handled with already familiar, already differentiated patterns of social practice.

### **Beyond the moment**

In this chapter I have focussed on respondents' movements and stories at a particular, significant moment in time. How they deal with this moment gives some clues about how they might be dealing with many other moments. When the young people in this study face this significant moment, they come to it differently equipped with understandings of what they were doing, and with relationships that made different manoeuvres safe. That is enough to deal with here, but later in the thesis I will explore the issue of other different resources – equipping respondents for any moment.

This chapter started by focussing on the moment at the end of grade 10 where respondents need to make choices about what happens next, and more specifically whether to 'stay on' or not. Rather than being simply a matter of choices, the things that happened are far better understood in terms of respondents' ongoing negotiations with the social world.

Respondents negotiated the summer of 1997-8 in dramatically different ways, on the basis of their different understandings about school and work, stories about where they had come from and where they were going, and alliances or relationships of trust. In this way we could clearly see their negotiation practices as a reflection of context and history. The chapter has presented one clear example of how different out-workings of individual agency are anchored within the structural conditions of each individual's existence.

At the level of individuals and real lives, these things have ongoing implications. Within the context of increasingly co-ercive school-retention policies, the chapter has also shown how respondents' 'choices to continue' education are so qualitatively different. Varied life-histories and diverse strategies leave respondents quite differently equipped for engaging in the settings in which they will find themselves next. It is these things that will be pursued further in chapter six.

## **6. *Practices of engagement***

This chapter presents another cohort-case-study of respondents' practices and stories around a significant moment in time. One and 1/2 years after leaving year ten, respondents' trails have diverged. Propelled by different understandings and steered by different opportunities, they have fanned-out in terms of their geographical location and their social relationships. Their lives differ enormously in terms of both everyday practice and the sense that they are making of it all.

This chapter explores the relationship between trajectory (particularly individuals' engagements vis-a-vis school and work) and meaning. The story that unfolds is one about relationships – here specifically the relationships between young people and the institutions that 'process' them (education, welfare, early work and associated on-the-job training). These in turn are profoundly shaped by other relationships – by the ways in which respondents are storying and engaging with life, with time, and with the social world more generally. Cyclic patterns of meaning and engagement, engagement and meaning (or lack thereof) show: firstly, young people very differently investing their energies with the institutions in question; and secondly, the life-passions of individuals being quite differently supported by these institutions.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of what is happening for respondents, one-and-a half years after leaving year 10. I will highlight some of the problems of understanding what is happening through 'static' conceptual frameworks – which do not do justice to the diversity and ongoing change in respondents' commitments. Also problematic are the more traditional, distant, 'objective' frames of analysis, which tend to oversimplify and compartmentalize young people's issues. In order to make sense of the variety and open-endedness of patterns in respondents' lives and trajectories, I am looking for a more dynamic, processual account – one which incorporates young people's own interpretations. In the context of respondents' own stories I will highlight the patterns in their 'practices of engagement' in the situations where they find themselves. Individuals' histories (and their ways of storying them) equip them very differently to engage with the institutions that manage their lives.

The chapter finishes by showing how the resulting relationships in turn shape both their lived experiences of being supported (or not) in major life- projects and their life –chances.

### **What happened**

One and a half years after leaving grade 10, (1999) respondents are again being interviewed. Topics include what has happened, as well as future plans. Two thirds of the respondents are now spending a large part of their week outside The Valley. Some have moved up to town alone or with families. Some are there for weeknights, whilst others have continued to commute daily. One works in a different rural area and is away from home for weeks at a time.

Among the class of '97 there is both an echoing of, and a variation from, the patterns of earlier years. In earlier groups (class of '95, '96), students were less likely to start or to continue years 11 and 12. They explained that they left college for the following reasons:

- Getting a job;
- Looking for a job;
- Loneliness at school (a place full of strangers and no critical mass of Geeveston peers);
- Family needed the money (unemployment benefit was a *default* option until '97).

By way of contrast, at the beginning of 1998 we find nearly the whole class of '97 starting college. As explained in chapter 5, this is a new development, and it can be attributed to multiple factors:

- Grade 10 interviews reveal that this class clearly heard the message from their teachers, however abstractly they understood it: 'You need college to get a job'. This also seems to be part of an increasing trend in student and parental awareness of the lack of jobs available;
- Critical mass - the mob bring each other along;
- Paucity of other options. Local entry-level jobs are getting scarcer even within in the time-frame of this study;

- Federal Government policy changes; since the introduction of the Youth Allowance in July 1988, unless these young people have a job, or their families want to financially support them, they simply have to go to college.

After only weeks the shuffling starts. Several from the class of '97 are leaving college. The reasons they give include:

- Getting a job;
- Looking for a job;
- Couldn't get into it;
- Other life priorities / crises (they explain that education does not work well when all creative energy is bound up elsewhere).

*Overview: for those who left The Valley*

There have been significant changes over time. At the time of the final interview, half of the class of '97 are still at school (year 11), some are working, some are looking for work, some are not. *The most significant change is that some of those who earlier would probably not have been at college, have stayed on.* The reasons listed above suggest that changes in practice are a direct reflection of the Federal Government's school retention policies. The provision of the Youth Allowance, coupled with a lack of jobs has gently and collectively steered respondents this way. However, as this chapter will show later, retention at school does not always result in meaningful engagement (see also Cunningham et al. 1992; Dwyer 1996).

Because of higher levels of school retention, there is significant postponement of other kinds of 'outcomes' for most. Two have secured jobs outside The Valley that offer significant future career prospects. Outside The Valley there are simply more job options for those with networks, with clear plans and an awareness of the systems that they are dealing with.

Most clearly, though, respondents' lived experiences are polarizing. For some this is a time when the issues of livelihood, social connectedness, and meaning are being addressed, while for others, it is the opposite. For some, this time represents the rapid expanding of their careers, their networks, and their stories of identity and life-passion, while for others it is much more about becoming lost or set adrift. This -



being set adrift - is happening either outside arrangements with school, work and jobseeking institutions, *or within them*.

Simon's is one such story of being set adrift. By the time of our third interviews, one and a half years after school-leaving, he has moved to another suburb. He has just quit a casual job in retail that he found meaningless – or rather, he was sacked after not showing up for work too many times. Unemployed and lonely, he rocks gently backwards and forwards and asks: 'Who've you caught up with from the group?' For confidentiality reasons, he cannot be told. Trinkets and ornaments are sparse in his basement flat, but the leavers' dinner photograph, dog-eared from inspection, sits in the middle of the floor.

*Overview: for those who stayed in The Valley*

For most of those who stayed within The Valley, the dust has settled faster, but not always in the ways that they had wanted. For some, staying has entailed compromise of other priorities. Being with the family represents a huge 'pull factor', and 2 who had intended to go, stay. They have opted to trade-off their plans outside The Valley 'for a time'. One has found a full-time job.

Two respondents encounter local occupational closure based upon gender and local disputes. One of these, a young woman had sought an apprenticeship in a typically male career and been denied access. This fits with wider patterns – young women are less likely to get apprenticeships (Holden 1992). The other felt that his inability to get a job was the result of an ongoing inter-family dispute – effectively he had been 'blackballed'. These complications add to an already diminished local job market. Both have had to make alternative plans. The first is in another industry, in low-paid casual work. She did not want to talk about it, or to review her earlier transcripts: 'Not that I wanted to be reminded about that.' The second is still keen to work but is doing unpaid work experience outside The Valley to avoid losing confidence.

Those young women who had said that they would work 'in a shop' were indeed in retail, and 3 others from the cohort had joined them. Reactions to their jobs are

diverse – for one a real drive to learn and get ahead (be promoted) - to a lacklustre: ‘Not getting me anywhere.’ (Todd 3:10).

Work options in The Valley are mostly in primary industry and food-processing, or service industries (eg. retail). This limits the quality of most available entry-level jobs to the routine and mundane, or the physically exhausting and the dangerous. For some of the respondents these jobs are both meaningful and fully appreciated. Dale enjoys his very physical work, and wrestling with the machinery. Several of the young workers interviewed, though, highlight work-hours, working conditions, and trying to retain some control of one’s own life as key issues. As in Holden’s (1992) study of early school leavers, seasonal work presents both a safety net and a poverty trap. A minority of the respondents’ jobs offer clear future prospects. Two have created back-up options for themselves (Navy, small home business). For every worker with a future there is one anticipating that the job may soon dry up.

#### *Overview of patterns for different cultural orientations*

By the time of the final interview, those who were ‘exploring’ at the time they left school are disproportionately involved in both school (over 2/3) and work (over 2/3) – and many are doing both. Two students have part-time hobbies that are in fact, promising second careers. Only two clearly articulate not being where they had planned to be.

Those ‘settling’ are mostly occupied, either in school or work. However, only half are where they had wanted to be. Two have met some blatant occupational closure, and while one went for another job, one is on job-search looking for work outside The Valley. Two are at school. Over 1/2 are working, though, which considering rural youth unemployment levels is a tribute to good strategies, good local allies, or both. One family even went to the extent of re-mortgaging the house to set up an agricultural business ‘for the kids to work in’. As explained above, two have also made significant inroads into second careers.

Of those who were ‘wandering’, significantly *none* are where they said that they wanted to be. Their idealism has limited connections with the world of real possibilities – of school and work, and so half of them are neither in school nor at

work. They have not been able to make use of entry-level jobs and education options yet to further their glamorized dreams (will they ever?), and so they are either at school or unemployed. The key feature in patterns for this group is that their earlier dreams are being stalled. Some will now snicker at their own transcripts - 'I can't believe that I said *that*' - but few have any better ideas to replace those ones with. Those who are attached at school and work are there primarily because they are made to be (by parents or by economic circumstances), or because their friends are there. Over half of those who were 'wandering' are now on job-search or other benefits, and one is raising a family.

Retreating young women are living in Geeveston, working in retail and raising children of their own. The women in retail are part of a fearsome small group, fortified against the world, watching each other's backs and no longer willing to be interviewed.

### **Conceptualizing what happened**

These patterns cannot properly be called 'outcomes', as in, for example, the status attainment literature of the 1970s and 80s (eg. Broom and Jones 1969; Broom and Jones 1976; Broom and Jones 1980). Firstly, these are early days. Another 5 years of following respondents' movements would yield some interesting results. Even then, other research is suggesting that 'it is difficult to identify an end point' even after 10 years (eg. see Semmens 2000).

Secondly and more significantly, though, wide-sweeping social changes mean that young people's transitions to adulthood have been extended in time, increased in complexity and changed in nature (Wyn and White 1997; Dwyer et al. 1998). Correspondingly, what becomes clear from most of the interviews is the open-endedness of the individuals' arrangements (even for those who have things 'sorted'). In this study we are now watching just one group of young people who are engaged in a process of ongoing negotiations and re-negotiations. Among this generation, negotiations may be set to continue for many years yet - will they be life long? (see Dwyer et al. 1999).

Several writers have recently made the point that ways in which young people and their transitions have traditionally been framed in research and theory do not adequately reflect current realities (see Looker and Dwyer 1997; Wyn and White 1997; Dwyer et al. 1998; Dwyer 2000). Clearly defined markers to adulthood have changed, moved or disappeared (Wyn and White 1997; Dwyer et al. 1998). The 'pathways' metaphor, used by educators and policy makers to reflect the journey from school, via training to work now no longer fits the picture of what is happening for many young people (see Looker and Dwyer 1997; Dwyer et al. 1998).

It has been a struggle to represent what is happening in terms of respondent outcomes or even respondent progress. Much of this stems from the ways in which labour market, educational options, and career 'pathways' have changed. In this study, as in others, when classifying individuals' movements, nearly every category becomes problematic. Where previous generations of young people could be classified as 'students' or 'workers', this is becoming increasingly complicated (see Dwyer et al. 1998). In an economy where part-time jobs are replacing full-time ones, should a part-time worker be counted as a worker? What makes a 'career' in a market of part-time jobs? (Dwyer et al. 1999). Is it appropriate to speak about careers as being a marker of having 'arrived' at adult status in a market-place which increasingly offers short-term casual jobs? (See Dwyer et al. 1998). Research into 'precarious employment' suggests an increase in non-standard employment and labour insecurity across many sectors of the workforce in Australia (see Burgess and Campbell 1998).

'Worker' is also hard to define in a rural market with its seasonal work patterns, its 'feast and famine cycles' (Holden 1992). The respondents in this study demonstrate that it is even becoming a moot point to talk about young people becoming 'integrated workers' (as in Dwyer et al. 1998) within a rural labour market that is itself dis-integrating. Whilst one respondent is secure within his apprenticeship, another apprentice respondent is not sure if the business that employs him will stay afloat for long enough for him to complete his training. It is not just particular jobs that are tenuous but whole workplaces, and, as Geeveston's recent history demonstrates (ie. the apples, logging - see ch. 3), whole industries.

Other traditional frameworks for understanding youth transitions do not capture current realities well. School-to-work transitions have been cast as binary, and adulthood is often positioned as an unproblematic status into which young people will arrive (Wyn and White 1997). These things are being contested in the lived experiences of the generation born after 1970 (see Dwyer et al. 1997; Dwyer et al. 1998).

Available conceptual frames give a very poor representation of the processes taking place. Static categories do not work with the complexity of these young people's lives. If we were to look at school and work outcomes, numbers would be doubled up because school and work are not separate in time. Increasingly school and work careers are constitutive elements of young people's lives, not opposite ends of a continuum (Looker and Dwyer 1997; Abbott-Chapman 1999). Also, the shape of outcomes depends upon when the question is asked - even which season in the case of seasonal workers, or which week in the case of casual workers. Such a display gives very little insight into the social *processes* that are taking place.

Traditional frameworks for making sense of these things also assume a linearity that is no longer reflected by the data in youth studies (see Holden 1992; Looker and Dwyer 1997; Dwyer 2000). For this group of respondents, as in these other studies, young people's trajectories are made up of multiple, overlapping, even zig-zagging changes in status. It is more useful to make sense of young peoples transitions as processual and differentiated (Wyn and White 1997).

A more dynamic approach might involve charting out respondents' commitments in sequence (Appendix D). Through such a representation we could get a sense of some of the diversity and some of the patterns. Those 'exploring' have the most consistent patterns. Their trajectories still mostly involve school and work, but in different combinations, many doing both at the same time. 'Settling' respondents' activities are also largely consistent, and school or work-based, although school features less, and the two are not mixed or undertaken together. Respondents who were 'wandering' have both the most long and elaborate strings of commitments (chopping and changing), but also the most truncated (eg. baby => benefit). For those 'retreating', school is the least likely scenario, with retail work and child-

rearing the norm. A clear down-side of this kind of linear-mapping approach is that it is hard to chart other life-commitments in sequence.

This approach still raises more questions than it answers. For example: since grade 10, why do those 'wandering' have both the longest *and* the shortest strings of commitments? Again the problems of simplifying and making sense of the data in this study reflect problems encountered in larger studies (eg. Holden 1992). For many respondents (particularly early school leavers) clear pathways are not evident. Stories are so individualized, each with its own sequencing and mediating contextual factors, and these can not be plotted well.

One problem is that when the focus is placed purely on school and work, the collection of information is 2-dimensional in lives that are complex. Multi-dimensional lives can not be understood in tables of school and work, binary transitions or statistics. Work and education commitments need to be understood within a life-context (Dwyer et al. 1999). Relationships with school and work institutions are in turn shaped by other facets of young people's complex lives (eg. home, relationships, interests) where they have other roles (see Buchanan 1993; Fitzclarence 1996) and other commitments. As 'pathways' are less predictable and more complex, more attention has to be paid to young people's own patterns of choice and commitment (Dwyer et al. 1998). Researchers in these areas (Dwyer et al. 1998; Wyn and White 1998) are suggesting that there is a real need for more qualitative work, with a more holistic focus.

Another problem is that indicators like young people's formal institutional connections also reflect a fairly superficial reading of social process. Young people can be travelling the same 'pathway' but experiencing it very differently (Looker 1996). This is something that shows up clearly with this group of respondents.

Focusing simply on young people's movements through institutions also has limited explanatory value. We now know that not all young people who complete year 12 will get jobs (Wyn and Lamb 1996). These things are reasons enough to be looking at the practices, habits, the different lived experiences of those involved, to find other ways of making sense of what we hear and see. 'Objective measurement' of young people's institutional attachments shows nothing of the nature of the relationships -

the meaning, how or why young people are there, what they are doing, and what they are able to do with them. Enforced retention in education - 'custodial' schooling (Abbott-Chapman et al. 1987) means that many students are 'reluctant stayers' (Semmens 2000) these issues become particularly salient. We have already seen in chapter 5 how young people can end up attached to school but quite differently equipped to use it. Attachment to an institution does not show anything about the lived experience of that - the qualitative differences in relationships with school, with work and with the whole project of job-seeking.

Likewise it is not the movement between institutional commitments that are significant, but how young people are able to make use of this movement. What we can not see if we view the changes by objective measurements, is that while some are gaining a position of strength via their movements, others are losing strength; while some are gaining options, others are fast losing them; while some are being empowered, others are progressively becoming worn down and disempowered in their interactions with the world of work and education. This is the polarization of lived experience that is taking place among these respondents.

In this chapter, close examination of interview data leads to a focus on one central conclusion. *The most significant patterns are not in respondents' formal institutional attachments per se, but in the kinds of negotiations and re-negotiations that are taking place between young people and those institutions.* The most significant patterns are in the ways in which young people are engaging with the social others that shape their life-chances. How did they get there? What are they doing? What sense are they able to make of it? What can they do with it? If we are interested in better understanding differentiated processes involved in young people's transitions, what is significant - in a time of enforced retention and limited options - is not documenting where young people are attached, or the sequences of their commitments. Rather the need is to document what they are doing with these relationships and what they are *able* to do with them. It is these things that are making a difference so powerfully in respondents' lives.

### **A different focus: patterns of engagement**

Young people are one of the social groups that are most processed, monitored, surveyed and managed by social institutions (Wyn and White 1997). Young people are not, however, simply being processed. They negotiate. The young people in this study do not think of themselves as 'integrated students' or 'integrated workers' (as if at some point they become somehow assimilated safely into institutions), or even as people awaiting an eventual integration. From our conversations, it is a much richer picture that emerges. Respondents show that there are some considerably different ways of doing college, doing work, doing unemployment. They make it clear that these are (at bare minimum) 2-way negotiations, complex, and loaded with meanings.

There are different ways of doing college. Sonia explains how she is making full use of the formal program at college:

'I still want to be a secretary. What I did last year is a VET program (yeah - you were going to do that before). Well I did it, I did it, and I got the certificate because I passed the subject and its just got 'Certificate 2 in Business', and on the back it's got all the modules that I completed. So I did that, and I went on all different work placements and I enjoyed that. And I wanted to do that to know whether I actually wanted to be a secretary, or whether to back out of it while I could, but I decided it was good. And then I um, and this year I'm studying 'Secretary in Business' and just my English and I did my basic maths and everything last year. So all I'm doing this year is a computer course which outlines how to make sure that letters and memos and all that are set out correctly and all that sort of stuff, so I got that pretty underway. (Sonia 3:1)

By contrast, on a school day, Sarah is just as likely to be found out in the bus-shelter smoking dope with her friends. She explains that she has trouble getting motivated to do her school-work or to go to classes. It just does not interest her:



- AW: So why go to college?
- Sarah: There's - school's a - its hard to explain 'cos its something that I do every day and I suppose I really live for it, you know like um, I haven't skipped a day....
- AW: So school is where a lot of your life happens now?
- Sarah: Um oh - it's not where a lot of it happens but it's where it's created.
- AW: Tell me more about that.
- Sarah: Well if I didn't go to school a lot of other aspects, parts of my life wouldn't be there, I don't think, and they've only showed up since I've been going to college. So it's a really good place (laughs) and you have to keep on going to, gain a good social life and all that.
- AW: Yeah, so it's kind of in your interest to be there?
- Sarah: Yeah, and also to learn things, I guess (Sarah 3:1)

These stories highlight some vastly different approaches to being at school. Likewise, there are different ways of doing work. Respondents who have secured entry-level jobs are articulating their different levels of investment in them. Ellen is really enjoying her job in retail:

Ellen: It's about the pay-check but it's about other stuff. I really like doing new things. I love training new people when they come on, and they've been getting me to do that a bit. You get to experience all sorts of stuff and I really like that - you get to try out all sorts of things. It's nice when your pay-check comes in, but the work's pretty good.

AW: So you put a bit of yourself in there?

Ellen: Yeah I do, I do - and they know that. And they're keeping their eye out for people who want to move up, and for people who want to do the work... and even though I said I didn't want to work in an office here I am doing it - it's sort of different - it's all stuff that we get to do out

there, and then we get to work it all out in the office and it's really interesting. (Ellen 3:1)

In contrast, for Todd, his own job in the same service industry is tantamount to a daily violation. Days at work are approached with reluctance. Time on the job is made bearable, sometimes interesting by workmates, but the tasks are not something that he cares to think about. They are boring. He's waiting for the day when a 'real job' will come along.

There are also different ways of doing the job-search. Andrew has been pounding the streets earnestly looking for work for months. The search for paid employment is sincere to the point of being soul-destroying, and he feels that it is really 'messing up' both his life and his confidence in himself. In the absence of a real job, he's committed himself to a program of unpaid work experience: 'just so I can keep busy, keep out of the house, keep on track.' (Andrew 3:10).

By way of contrast, Nigel's approach to being unemployed is far more resigned and pragmatic. He has not really thought about what type of work he would like: 'just anything really', or what he could do now to help prepare himself for work. Having discovered that there is no work around for him, and checking the options as best he felt he could, Nigel spends most of his days: 'eating, sitting around watching TV and sleeping' (Nigel 3:5). He describes the process as making him: 'not happy but not really miserable - bit of both - just getting along' (Nigel 3:7). Nigel finds the requirement to get out and look for work 'pretty harsh', because he knows that there is no work about: 'You don't feel like getting out and doing it'. He explains his rationale to keep doing it:

Nigel: Just the fact that if I don't, I'll have no money.

AW: Ok ... so it does work on one level 'cos you get your money?

Nigel: Yeah - enough money to live on - depends on what I've got to do with it. (Nigel 3:6).

What we see here is a skeletal and pragmatic commitment to going through the motions - because it sustains him financially, and for Nigel to do anything else does not make much sense.

## *Engagement and disengagement*

The most significant differences in all 3 institutional settings (college, work and job-searching) revolve around young people's different levels of *engagement* in the *formal* task or program. In their interviews they are talking about different levels of engagement in the daily process of becoming educated, in day-to-day work and in finding a job. *Engagement* is about a connection with a social other or project. Engagement allows flows and exchanges of information and resources. It entails openness, even ultimately to the point of being changed through the relationship. Individuals' different levels of engagement in projects and with social others are shown by their investments, most obviously the willing investment of *time*. However, time on its own is a particularly unreliable indicator, especially for those who have limited power over time-commitments (for example, young people in compulsory schooling). As Sarah, Todd and Nigel have just demonstrated, it is quite possible to be present in body while not in spirit. More reliable indicators relate to investment of *attention* and *energy*, and of *self* and *identity*.

Investment of *attention* and *energy* relates to having really thought about the project. It is shown when they are researching options (ie. what's going on here); stocktaking (where I am in relation to desired goals, ie. how my different achievements and assets are significant or useful); means to ends calculations (ie. 'storying' how it might be and what I could do now). Conversely, lack of engagement is shown when minimal attention / energy is put in to the project, when respondents have not really thought about it, or when they are 'working to rule' (or less).

The other significant part of engagement involves investments of *self* and *identity*, an embracing of the role, being *fully present in the activity*. The most telling indicator by far is something that occurs regularly in interviews, which is best described as *abundant unsolicited storytelling*. It begins with willing, spontaneous history-giving about a given topic:

AW: Yeah, so you're leaning towards what sort of jobs at the end?

Sam: Ah, anything outdoors...

I've just been down the Franklin River for the first time... I was, as a trainee guide I went down there... That was really good. Got

to do a day's guiding down there. And umm I just sit up the back of the raft and do a lot of guiding and yell out the commands and everything. Yeah.

AW: ... All right, okay. Now, what do you get out of that?

Sam: Umm, being out doors. Yeah and with the people, that's great...

And also you get paid as well, so... It's a dream job for me.

(Sam 2:5-6)

Such storytelling often incorporates rich imaginings about the future:

... want to do trips down the river and bush walking and stuff... I haven't done a lot yet, but yeah, I've hopefully got a lot of work over this summer to do. (Sam 2:5)

Conversely, lack of engagement is minimal investment of self and identity; what Goffman (1959) would call significant 'role-distance' from the task. It is revealed when individuals are present (eg. in school, work, or job-seeking activity) in body but not in mind (eg. other informal programs, daydreams, being 'wasted'). It is also indicated by lack of grounded connections between the topic and the individual's own life-stories. For example, some simply say, as their sole rationale for being at college: 'You need to go to college to get a job.' (Kylie 2:22, Sarah 2:10, Phoebe 3:3). They have bought the line, but it remains un-grounded in their own stories of identity, and in their day-to-day practices.

The notion of *practices of engagement* can be seen as relevant to all social relationships. Although this chapter is looking specifically at relationships with schools, workplaces, and job-search programs, these are not happening in a social vacuum. They are both affected by, and reflected in other engagements with the social world. Some examples of this relate to formal and informal programs.

### *Engagement in 'formal' and 'informal' programs*

Respondents' 'informal' or 'alternative' programs are shared 'unofficial' definitions - of the situation, and group practices associated with these definitions. Details of

these are prolific in the stories of most of the respondents. Informal programs are most common where people have a shared history.

Some alternative programs fit in well with school, work, and job-search routines. In many cases informal programs are treated as subject to formal ones (eg. lunchtime chats, free-time together, social space-’fillers’). *In most instances formal and informal programs not only accommodate the other, but each also becomes significant in the maintenance of the other.* For Todd, ‘having a laugh’ is an important part of the day in a routine service job. Kelly and Andrew both explain how the lack of their old classmates and the loss of their valued (informal) social program *was a significant reason for not staying on* at college. Other research with young people has elaborated similar themes - friendship is central to the experience of school (Coleman 1971; Wilson and Wyn 1987) just as ‘having a laff’ is an important part of work on the shop-floor (Willis 1979).

*In other situations and with other actors, informal programs can have priority over formal ones.* This is true of Sarah and Kylie’s experience. Sarah (3:10) explains that she often intends to go to class, but then friends will bring out: ‘a little something to share... And then you can’t go in to class. You just feel paranoid like: ‘everybody’s looking at me’’. She explains that going to maths, ‘wasted’, is ‘a really bad idea’. Here informal activities come to significantly undermine participation in the formal ones. Such daily battles are particularly an issue for those who are already less engaged in the formal programs.

Interestingly, in Sarah’s story, through her different engagements in formal and informal programs, school has become both a source of alienation *and* of social connection.

### *‘Just Doing It’*

In the absence of others with whom informal programs are shared, or in situations where no informal program has developed, kids simply ‘do time’ – they ‘just do it’. Phoebe (3:3) has explained how school [college] is boring her:

AW: Are you going to stay there ?

Phoebe: Yeah

AW: Why?

Phoebe: *'Oh you need college to get a job'*

AW: ... and job - what are you going to do?

Phoebe: I've no idea - I'm like the only one in my class who doesn't know what I want to do.

AW: [So, college] ... do you like it?

Phoebe: Nah, I'm *just doing it*.

For those who are attached to college or work but disengaged, and those who find themselves without an informal program in which they can engage, *all* options involve *withdrawing* self and identity, attention and energy from the scene. Respondents do this either by stopping, or simply *disengaging* and 'doing time'. So the option is either to be *not there*, or *not there in spirit*. What actually happens seems to depend upon the level of control that individuals have over their own commitments.

It would be untrue, though, to suggest that people are either fully engaged or fully disengaged. Engagement varies in degrees, and these degrees change with time, in lives that are also made up of other priorities. Most respondents who are students, even 'good students', oscillate between informal programs, doing time, and engagement. Amongst those who are unemployed, some are engaged in the job-search, some are disengaged and just mostly doing time, while those who are in company are oscillating between doing time and creating informal programs.

Doing time, as reported by respondents is not comfortable. It is boring. It also involves some *cognitive contradictions* that are fairly hard to live with. For example: I don't see the sense in school / I have to come here; I hate bludgers / I am not working; Here is what I want to be doing / I'm not able to do it. Even for the most pragmatic of respondents, doing time is usually accompanied by fairly high levels of frustration:

I don't like sitting around doing nothing day in and day out ... just sit there all day looking at the TV and listening to music - get up every couple of hours and ... make a cup of coffee - and have something to eat and stuff - just drives you mad (Nigel 3:7)

It involves (usually fairly passive) hopes that it will not always be like this:

I'll grow out of it. (Ben 3:10)

or

One day I could wake up and everything will go right for me. (Nigel 3:7)

and *only sometimes* are there clear expressions of anxiety:

Simon is being interviewed with his cap pulled down over his eyes.

Between chain smoking, sniffing, and rocking on the edge of his chair he speaks in short, almost unintelligible bursts. (Fieldnotes, October 1998).

For some respondents, doing time is a lifestyle. It also co-exists with increased use of stress-relieving medication. Dope both reduces the angst, and becomes an alternative program with social engagements and connections in its own right. Several respondents have suggested that as an informal program, marijuana comes to openly compete with their more formal commitments: through commanding the same time-periods; through chemically induced 'laziness'; and through dulling and over-riding other stories of identity and projects. In these ways the ritual becomes both a *response to disengagement* in formal programs, and a *powerful amplifier of that disengagement*.

Doing time together can become the basis of scavenger hunts for other informal programs. Individual stories reveal that groups are creatively cobbling together programs using all kinds of available resources (cars, events, animosities, histories, last-week's stories). All types of activities are included, from the titillating to the mundane - 'just hanging around shops' - from the socially sanctioned, to the 'senseless' (lighting fires in bins, car antics on the school oval) to the illegal. Midnight drag racing, driving around (and around and around), weekends partying, petty vandalism, historical 'feuds' between towns, and even involvement in car theft

are discussed in interviews in the light of seeking meaningful activity. Informal programs like this mean something to engage in, to invest in, to do together, to talk about and plan, to tell stories about, to embellish, to re-tell together. Other research talks about this too (Corrigan 1982). As such, the issue is not so much 'leisure' or 'leisure boredom' as it is often superficially portrayed in the literature (eg. see Patterson and Pegg 1999) but about creatively finding meaning and social connectedness in day-to-day life.

Informal programs can come to involve their own sequences and formats. When regularly repeated, they begin to get their own touch of formality, rules and routines. What started as something to do becomes the basis of some respondents' stories of identity, or careers (eg: the career of a midnight drag-racing champion; how to become known as a party animal; being my mate's bodyguard).

The stories shared so far make it quite clear that post-compulsory-school transitions involve not one-way processing of young people, but negotiations that are (at bare minimum) two-way. Respondents are engaging differently, because they come to work, come to college, come to the job-search very differently equipped, both in terms of meanings and in terms of patterns of social practice.

### **Issues of meaning and relevance**

Respondents *all* say one thing clearly - albeit in very different words - that they engage where it is *relevant*. Relevance demarcates what is worth doing, struggling with, or putting oneself out for. Relevance, in turn, rests upon what individuals know, understand, are familiar with, and feel safe with. It also depends upon their stories of what they themselves are doing. Respondents of different cultural orientations are finding different things to be meaningful and relevant. Correspondingly, issues of work, education, and job-seeking are themselves all located very differently in young people's lives and frames of reference.

'Exploring' respondents are those who (still) have clear, 'global' stories, but they are neither one group, nor homogenous. Work can be: about a specific vocation (Nicolette wants to be a counsellor); chosen for prospects of a good career (podiatry has good prospects and Alyssa does not mind playing with people's feet); about more



significant contextual factors (Mel wants to have her own business in a rural area and this seems to be a good way to do it); or rather than a specific job, a guiding set of principles and area of interest (Peter wants to be doing research, and helping to do 'something useful' like reducing land-degradation).

Among those 'exploring' there are gender differences. The young women were talking in terms of being less bound to one job, and also discovering that they may be less available to be as career-focussed as they thought that they would be. Wanting to have families played a key role in these changes in ideas. For many, as in other research, (see Wyn and Holden 1994) a key shift at this point is realising that they need to negotiate or manage these complexities on their own.

The common thing about this group, though, male and female, is that all expect work to be fulfilling in its own right, as a career and a formal program in which they will *engage*. Consequently there is a lot of emphasis on what they are doing now, the *right choices*, and *wanting to get the early career stages right*. Education and entry-level jobs are viewed differently, and often understood as *relevant*, in this light. So too are other strategic steps such as getting cars, moving, and finding part-time jobs to fund their priorities.

By way of contrast, among those who are 'settling', getting straight into local work after grade 10 is the most relevant thing - a meaningful goal in its own right. This contrasts with the findings of other research (Holden 1992), where for that group, to go straight to work from grade 10 is to effectively be a school 'refugee', and movements come from a negative propulsion (fleeing from the experience of education). In this case, the findings strongly relate to a cultural orientation where *all meaningful (relevant) things are contained within The Valley*. In a climate where the work-ethic is so significant, getting work within The Valley is a ticket to legitimately stay there.

Among both 'exploring' and 'settling' respondents there are also issues of gendered identities and work. Young women are talking about 'good work' in terms of that which would provide good infrastructure for other valued priorities (staying in Geeveston, friends and lifestyle, relationships, having a family). Six of the young women in this study made their relationships and planned futures with particular

boyfriends a central feature of their interviews, while none of the young men did the same in relation to girlfriends.

For 'settling' young men, there are other dimensions of meaning. Going to work straight out of school is ultimately the *most meaningful* thing. Work is about belonging - it is only via their projects (*doing* things together in a culture of *few words*) that young men are connected to other men in their community. Teenage activity revolves around the same things – 'blokey' projects - they are being groomed to be fully embedded in this world.

The familiar, and what I/we 'can do' is a significant part of meaningful work. Mastery of a project is a significant anchor for identity. In interviews, 'settling' men's spontaneous storytelling is about competence and 'can do'. Work is about identity, how men become men. In a cultural climate where 'can do' is honoured, technology is recognised for the threat that it is. Other studies (eg. Williams 1981a) have documented 'exaggerated masculinity' or male 'physicality' (White 1997c) and the way this overlaps with what is required in tough physical work.

There are still other layers of meaning for 'settling' respondents. Time and again people from 'The Valley' reveal in their comments that work is not just meaningful because of its *content*, but because of its much richer symbolic value. For example, in the data-gathering stages of this project several adult locals helped me to fill in a table locating where all grade 10 leavers in the last 10 years had gone. The patterns in their responses were interesting - a quiet, if not proud sanctioning of good, honest, humble work. The justification: 'We will always need garbage collectors' is as much validation as is required. The young men echoed these judgements in their own stories.

Further conversations revealed that this could be read on several levels. Doing 'real work', or useful work, for this community is a significant meaning in itself. Old Methodism and a working class work-ethic provide a historical platform from which to value only 'useful' work. As Brett says:

A few jobs aren't worth paper they're written on I don't reckon. (3:5).

Likewise job-security is a significant meaning for the men in itself:

I chose this because we will always need mechanics. (Mark 3:10)

Mark's comments may well also reflect local history and cultural exposure to issues of redundancy and lack of security. Other research with Australian young people (Dwyer et al. 1999) has also highlighted *security* as a priority for some young people over job-satisfaction, earning potential, or career opportunities. In a national climate of precarious employment (Burgess and Campbell 1998) this focus makes sense.

Finally, these things also speak volumes about traditional roles of men, as providers of security for their families. From their earliest essays in grade 7 and 8 these young men showed that the job was not just *a* part of what they saw themselves doing, but it was *the core issue*. These things, together, in whatever combination, mean that work is not just meaningful, but it is *central to their nobility*. Of course, then, for those with a 'settling' cultural orientation, work and the job-search are both very relevant. It also means that to be 'settling' and to be unemployed involves disconnection from: a role supporting a family; public face; the shared life of blokes; valued activity; self concept and pride. In short, this means dislocation from livelihood, from community, from self (as identity is defined by what I do) and from the things that are most meaningful. It leads to a very *relevant* struggle to get out of this situation. It also means that to stay on at school is not just inconvenient, not just irrelevant, or a strategic detour, but a daily violation. It stands between these respondents and all of the things that are most meaningful.

'Wandering' respondents are the ones who (even still at interview 3) have glamorized plans and very unclear stories about how they would achieve them. Ideas of good work are (still) characterized by lack of real-world connections. Accordingly, neither entry-level jobs, nor continuing education are being treated as very *relevant*. A lack of engagement in these formal projects is the result. Here unemployment and truancy feature. Young people are leaving school because it is seen as irrelevant to their needs (Wyn and Holden 1994). They become alienated in environments that are not seemingly related to the world to which they are gaining access (Stokes and Holdsworth 1998). Rather, these respondents seem to be seeking

access to a world more like the one they have seen on TV – both effortless and full of commodities and fun.

The respondents who were ‘retreating’ could not, in early interviews or later conversations, say what they wanted to do. This has meant that very little of what is formally on offer can be framed as relevant. As 3 out of 4 missed their third interviews, it is hard to tell what they are thinking now. It is important to let both their absence and their silence do the talking.

Through their different frames of reference, respondents are finding themselves quite differently located in relation to the things that are meaningful or relevant to them. Of course, then, they are responding with very different levels of engagement to the institutional settings in which they find themselves.

NB. All respondents are, in some senses negotiating with the process of this research in the way that they would any other formal ‘youth processing’ program. Those ‘exploring’ tend to make use of the opportunities for self-development (wanting to keep transcripts, even making notes of things to talk about in interviews). Those ‘settling’ are often amused and not really sure of the relevance, but are usually (except when in vocational crisis) good-natured and co-operative. Those ‘wandering’ will engage fully while it captivates them (thankfully in all cases it still does). Those ‘retreating’ showed a crystal clear pattern with third interviews - agree to do it => make excuse / not show up => make another time / no-show. These tactics avoid trouble but also avoid confrontation (ie. honest refusal). I suspect that these are well-learned survival skills.

In school, in work, and in job-seeking activities, patterns of meaning and engagement are cyclic. These are the ‘broad-brush-stroke’ patterns (captured in more detail in Appendix E):

Meaning in formal process => engagement => more elaborated meaning  
=> further engagement.

For example, Sonia’s commitment to the idea of becoming a secretary has lead to engagement in the VET program at school, which then shapes her level of skills, her

sense of identity as a secretary, and her new networks. This process of increasing commitment to an identity in both public and private spheres is what Becker (1963) and Goffman (1961) called a 'career'. For her, alongside some other significant relationships, this forms a foundation for making a life – livelihood, meaning, and social connections. Conversely, though:

Lack of meaning in formal process => lack of engagement => lack of meaning => lack of engagement.

At the time of our final interview Kylie was finding it much safer to withdraw her energies from the social world. To do 'nothing' represented far less trouble. Her Dreaming world presents a much safer option:

AW: So when you do your dreaming thing is that just pure dreaming?

Kylie: Yeah that's just dreaming because you know that's not going to come true anyway.

AW: Yeah - so you can do it and you don't get hurt?

Kylie: Yeah! Most of my dreams are all happy anyway. Yeah - I never have sad endings on my dreams....

Among the 'wandering' and 'retreating' respondents this tends to show up in terms of a routinization of life and skills with much smaller networks, and smaller numbers of social commitments which challenge or stretch identity definitions. They will tend to spend days in the company of peer groups, families, or simply their own heads. While these privatized lives are safe and meaningful, they are also quite structurally vulnerable (eg. dependent on welfare) and isolated (dependent upon each other).

Something else common to school, work and job-seeking is that they all entail a measure of challenge and day-to-day struggle. For example, even the 'best' workers get hassled at work, and the best students say that they find school tiring. Something that seems to be common to all respondents, is that if projects are meaningful, they will tolerate hardship. If struggles are meaningful, that is not usually a problem for the ongoing investment of energy. Sometimes, the struggle is an integral part of the way that different projects are storied and valued (eg : 'hard study' and identity as student; 'real men' and 'hard work', 'party animal' and 'being wrecked the next

day'). Note here the significant role of shared meanings and cultural differences in ways of making sense of activity. The mythology (shared stories) around different struggles are what makes those struggles meaningful to different cultural groups.

However, the fragmentation we see in some of these young people's trajectories – their strings of commitments – often short-lived (Appendix D), reflects the fallout from struggle that has not been made meaningful. This is not simply an issue of a social group's limited cultural understandings or practices. Not all struggle can and should be framed as noble and meaningful - some is simply the result of inequalities of opportunity and broader social injustice. It would, for example, be a fallacy to suggest that these kids should just recognise that dull work is good for them and get on with it. As Wyn and White (1997) suggest, it becomes disingenuous to advocate work as a good option and ignore the conditions under which some young people must work. Likewise, to go about educating these young people about why it is good for them would be to perpetuate this injustice.

A growing body of literature suggests as a society we are creating more ways of offering struggle which is less than noble to our young. This happens through the casualization of the labour market. One of the issues of today is the proliferation, of short term contracts, at the expense of training and career paths - 'part-time jobs that go no-where' (Wyn and White 1997:124). Labour forces have been restructured to the point where many are now not able to enter the labour force in their youth (Polk and Tait 1990). For young people who find it hard to get a foot-hold in the market, economic reform, competition policy, the deregulation of industrial relations and trade liberalization all have the power to profoundly affect young people through further loss of social protection and income security (Bessant 1996:49).

Also, if government policies formally only recognise unemployment as being the result of inadequate training for the individual, then many individuals are set for a lot more struggle. In effect, the push to get educated and be job-ready is setting-up individuals, in a society where there are simply not enough jobs for these people.

Also, work that starts as being relevant and meaningful, can progressively become less meaningful (Willis 1979). In the 1970s Willis referred to the factory doors becoming a prison to working class lads. In Australia, early school leavers can also

find themselves at a real disadvantage longer term, locked out of the formal economy (Wyn 1998). 'Underemployment' and 'dead-end jobs' have social and psychological costs for young people (Munro 1992).

Of course, a significant issue for some respondents is the collapse of the rural sector (see chapters 2 and 3). Under current social conditions, opportunities and the things that are meaningful for many respondents exist in two diverging social worlds - increasingly removed from each other.

These things together spell out the diminishing of what many respondents would see as good futures, meaningful struggle, and these being replaced by struggles which many are finding less meaningful and less able to engage in.

### **Coherence and incoherence in stories and commitments**

Third interviews are very revealing - not just in terms of what different individuals are saying, but what they are doing, their patterns of practice, and *how* they find meaning in past, present, and future. Some are actively making their peace with what has happened between interviews - storying the things that worked, (the wins) as 'how we / I did it' or 'things to do again', and the things that went wrong, (the losses), as 'what not to do again'. History is being processed (to greater and lesser extents) into patterns and frameworks of 'what I know', 'what I can do', and 'what I am doing', into (more or less) cumulative wisdoms which will guide further action.

Meanwhile others are doing something different. When asked specific questions about how they got here they will say: 'I don't know, it just happened'. As we talk about what has changed, we will venture into a land of relatively un-storied incidents, fragments, isolated happenings, and conflicting accounts. These represent individuals' vastly different ways of working with their own life-history. There are corresponding differences in the ways that respondents are dealing with their futures.

In the one-and-a-half years between re-interviews, many plans have been upset or disrupted (eg. no apprenticeship, no job). Also, nearly everyone has had other life-issues that have imposed on plans and thinking about the future (eg. sickness or injury, significant relationships, changes in family circumstance, changes in nature of

friendships, blocked options, new ideas). For some, these register in a major way in our conversations (eg. explained as new directions), whilst for others, they have not been drawn into coherent stories and may well remain as unconscious saboteurs of action.

As explained earlier, two of those 'exploring' ended up staying in Geeveston for family reasons. Some of those 'settling' are either at college, without jobs, or without the jobs that they sought. In our interviews and day-to-day, these respondents are busily reconciling plans to current circumstances using combinations of the following strategies:

- Postponement - a temporary 'holding pattern' - making peace with limbo *for now* - disengaged, doing time, in the context of a bigger story that makes sense of it and makes it meaningful (eg. for family, *for now* / there's no jobs in 'The Valley', *for now*)
- Resolution #1 - shrink or grow hopes to fit reality - 'Changed m' plans a bit since we last talked.' (Brett 3:1)
- Resolution #2 - forget the dream - 'Not that I wanted to be reminded of that anyway.' (Karen 3:1)

The most significant difference is that while some are busily reconciling plans and circumstances through story (as if a state of limbo would be untenable), others are simply accepting and living within the state of limbo. When asked about living in limbo, about why she did not or would not make plans about her future, Kylie explained:

'Cos I don't plan - like I said to you before - 'cos I don't plan stuff because it just doesn't turn out to be right. (Kylie 3:11)

Such patterns of practice have everything to do with a young person's social context and history (particularly family history). This in turn relates to the different kinds of resources (practical, symbolic, or cultural) available to individuals, families, and groups to have control over day-to-day circumstances. Other conversations, too, are stark reminders that for several of the respondents day-to-day life is tenuous and



unpredictable. For example, Nigel didn't know that he was moving out of town until the day before:

Mum and me sisters were up here and one day Dad just decided we were coming up 'ere - I didn't know nothing about it until I'd seen him later on that day... Yeah, he just said we was comin' up 'ere and that was it.  
(Nigel 3:4)

These conversations with 'wandering' and 'retreating' respondents drive something home. *Assumptions about futures and being able to plan them belong to the privileged. They belong to those who come from stable worlds, those who have a measure of control over their own lives, and those who know that they have.* Other research has pointed out how one of the effects of personal and structural marginalization is the significant loss of young people's power of decision making (eg. see Brown 1991). In Kylie's story this manifests as the withdrawal of her will to make certain decisions. The world where people plan, and things work out, is not the world that Kylie lives in.

This is, as much as anything, about the journey of the individual through time. When understandings, learnings, decisions, and practices are seen to fruition, built upon, or otherwise rewarded, there is some kind of emergent journey (or several concurrent journeys) taking place, going to somewhere or to several 'somewheres'. On the other hand, when understandings, learnings, decisions, and practices are undermined all the time, this means fragmented journeys, lack of engagements or temporary engagements with institutions and other forms of community life, and lack of coherence in commitments.

These things have profound implications. While some respondents are very actively involved and engaged in the busy process of building futures, reconciling the past and now, and reconciling now to the future, others are simply not able to engage in these practices.

Those who are engaging in the process of building futures, whether global or local, are *making sense of now* in the light of these futures. For Sonia, to go to work in

town and live in The Valley means that she needs to have a car, which in turn means that she had better get a holiday job *now* rather than go and spend time with her friends down at the beach. Although that combination of work and school makes for a hectic life (ie. it is not comfortable), her days at work contain *meaning* in terms of an implicit reward - ie. the knowledge that she is earning that car. Likewise Joel will work nights and weekends to build up his own nursery business, in order to have a job when and if he gets laid off from his other work. Though there may not be many spare hours, there is a quiet satisfaction in making this dream a reality. Meanwhile for those who are not able to draw on the future in this way, *now* can only make sense in terms of explicit, experienced reward.

This also has implications in terms of the lived experience of struggle. When *the meaning of now* is interpreted only in terms of explicit and immediate reward, tolerance for daily struggle is lowered. Ben says that he really wants a job - 'just anything really'. We talk about criteria for good work. He explains: 'If I didn't like it then I'd just quit and stop doing it.' (Ben 2, 668:668). Without strong lines of reference to the future, to engage in things that are boring or hard simply does not make much sense. This means that projects are started and aborted:

AW: Year 11?

Ben: Yeah I started doing that and then they sent me a form that said I had to pay them \$270 a term... didn't have enough... I don't know I just couldn't be bothered. (Ben 3, 10)

There are still other implications. When *the meaning of now* is interpreted only in terms of explicit and immediate reward, this means that 'buzz' (adrenaline rush, fun, scares) has a much higher profile in the structuring of day-to-day life. It also means that other valued projects which do not entail a high and sustained measure of 'buzz' will receive only sporadic commitment. Ben will decide to do something and then become his own worst enemy. He will start school and then not show to classes, restart school and then quit. He also shares that he absolutely detests walking but that he hasn't got his driver's license yet:

AW: What goes wrong with that?

Ben: Every time I get \$25 so I can get my birth certificate I spend it on something else. So I haven't got that yet. (Ben, 3:8)

These practices are reactive rather than proactive, ultimately disempowering rather than empowering because of the short-lived rewards attached to the kinds of projects that are attractive and unattractive. In the absence of a story that makes the struggle meaningful, individuals stop doing the things that are unpleasant (when tired, when bored, when it is hard, when scared). This is particularly the case if history has taught them that the chances of being rewarded for effort are minimal. If they feel they have no choice, they are simply disengaging (there in body, but not in spirit). So we find individuals doing time, or paralyzed, or simply giving up on significant career steps because they were hard. When there is a hazy definition of the situation, fragmented stories of what they are doing, or simply no recognition of the relevance of what is happening, it is discomfort that has the deciding vote in what happens next. By way of contrast, those who have a definition of the situation and reconciled, grounded stories of their aims have a reason to keep doing it, or alternatively a reason to call 'enough!' and go and do something else (ie. reflection and evaluation, decisive action, pro-activity, deliberate choice). Fear or discomfort does not have the final word about everyday practice when there is meaning and purpose breathed into it. The struggle is framed as meaningful.

These things have *implications* for attaining a livelihood. For some, school and the job-search do not make much sense. These people (because of social practices which are a result of cultural location and history) are effectively excluded from engaging meaningfully or consistently in the formal programs on offer. The result is marginalization, either outside these programs or within them. Respondents demonstrate that, when this is the case, we are likely to find them engaging elsewhere (informal projects, daydreaming) and building their 'careers' and group stories in other places (eg. in their social lives, in new family units).

In a competitive job-market, amidst structural changes that affect everyone, those who are already privileged have a relative advantage. Youth-processing institutions (eg. school, job-search) are built around the *practices of the privileged* - geared

towards making futures, and based upon the *assumptions of the privileged* - about even *being able to make futures*. Not all respondents have grown up in that world. And so we are finding that neither can all respondents, at this time, partake in this world. It is simply not the world of their lived experience.

### **Making other lives**

Although many are engaged in school and work and jobseeking, one third of respondents are making lives often within, but despite institutional arrangements. Their struggles are important to document because they are in their own way embodying the struggles of their generation - people retained in education systems, on dole cues, and within work situations that are less than meaningful.

In the context of the lack of entry-level jobs for young people, retention policies, and 'pathways to no-where', there has been some debate among researchers about whether this is a 'generation on hold' (see: Côté and Allahar 1994; Dwyer et al. 1998). This group of respondents presents a mixed picture. Some are clearly very engaged, right now, in the processes of making a future. They know of no other social order and are engaging fully in this one (see Wyn and White 2000). Others, who are drawing on local stories of 'how it should be', talk about the lived experience of being stuck and waiting. Some have engaged in as small a social world as possible and stopped talking. Many, though, are simply daily engaging in other projects. This last group needs a particular focus here – this is their story.

Turner (1976) was perhaps a symbolic interactionist ahead of his time. He predicted that increasingly people would be less able to find 'anchorages' for their identities, or meaning systems to which they could devote themselves within institutional frameworks. This theme has more recently has been picked up by McDonald (1999) among working-class youth in Melbourne's west. This is also a particularly salient issue for these young people.

In the midst of conditions that are less than ideal, the perspectives of young people often reflect optimism (Wyn and White 2000). Young people are not passive and are engaging with their conditions in new and diverse ways - responding 'as best they can' to their circumstances (Wyn and White 2000:167). They find other ways of

making meaning and social connections. A result of the unattractiveness of the formal programs on offer – the diversity of young people’s arrangements - is evidence of the will to live, the will to make life meaningful. The sting in the tail, though, is that often these programs do not fit well with formal programs and institutional frameworks (eg. school, jobsearch) and further marginalization is the result. Sarah’s story of creative practices and the institutional responses will exemplify these patterns clearly.

### *Creative practices*

Sarah explained earlier that school is still a central institution, but she uses it to a different end. Emotional energy and identity are still being invested in ‘careers’ and in projects, but of an immediate social, not of an occupations or futures kind.

AW: ... and that, that is the important bit of the week then, or the other or both?

Sarah: I think the Friday onwards is the important part of the week. But Friday at school um, is good, though. There’s always excitement in the air.

AW: Anticipating?

Sarah: Yes, what’s going to happen that night - and you have no idea when you, walk out the door. (3:20)

This is a way of structuring the week. Shared meanings produce the social ritual and rhythms that make day-to-day life more coherent and meaningful:

AW: So what does a weekend like this give you, what’s the main satisfaction, or enjoyment or whatever?

Sarah: I think that every week, from Monday to Friday I live for that weekend, and plan that weekend, and once it’s over, um, it just takes you back to Monday again and - start again. It gives you some ideas of what to do though, for the next weekend.

AW: So every weekend you build on what you learned last weekend or -

Sarah: Yeah trying to have a better time, and a better time... (3:21)

Building the weekend has become core business for Sarah. Building a career of better weekends. A kind of self-sustaining resonance has developed - planning leads to regular and socially shared victories (including 'buzz'), and these small wins provide direction and energy for further engagement and investment.

Some other issues emerge here. This is the kind of 'resonance' - effort and feedback - that some other respondents (not Sarah, not her many peers) are reporting from within education and occupation systems themselves. Why not for Sarah? Is it because the system is failing her or because she had never invested herself in the first place? Probably both. Analogously, different ways of making a life look a little like the weekly serial / short story versus the epic voyage. Education systems fit better with the kids who are engaged in the epic voyage.

From interviews it seems as if getting a job has never been core business for Sarah (unlike some of her 'settling' peers who are also stuck at college). Sarah has presented as pragmatic and uninvested in this topic from the start (in grade 8 essay, grade 8 interview, grade 10 interview, and now in two long interviews). Her stance is by no means antagonistic or political or aware of the socially systemic nature of her situation. For example, she is not saying: 'Stuff the system because it has made no room for me'. Rather, it seems that her worldview or consciousness just has not got room for work ethic and job - these ideas are simply not meaningful or *relevant*. Despite many lines of questioning, in interviews Sarah would just not talk about working as a lifestyle. Her primary social others, the women of her family, have been marginalized in occupational terms. As a cultural reference group, they have learned to make lives that are meaningful to them without it. It seems that the tradition continues through Sarah. *Patterns of exclusion become self-replicating through generations.*

### *Institutional responses*

It seems that for individuals who have their primary engagements in alternative programs, the lived experience of formal programs (education, jobsearch) is 'hassle'. Sarah is putting in a minimum of effort to college because her core purpose is elsewhere. The school apparently, does not perceive this to be a legitimate option.

For its next move in the negotiations, it has passed details of her absences onto Austudy who also do not legitimate it. This institution responds to Sarah with a threat - she is going to lose her money:

AW: Did you end up ringing social security?

Sarah: Yes, I rang them last night.

AW: How'd you go?

Sarah: When I got home, well, I rang up the lady that I had to ring up, and I said to her: 'Oh can you please explain this letter to me, that I got', and she waffled on a bit and told me that if I didn't um come into school and see my teachers about my absences and all that, and try to clear up some, and send her a most recent absences report... I'd have to sign a contract to say that I wouldn't make any more unexplained absences from classes for the rest of the term, and the next term, and the next term would be just, you know, as it usually is - you have 5 days of unexplained absences before you lose the money, and if I break that contract then they cut off my money for the rest of the year. (Sarah 3, 20)

Sarah's relationship with college is pure, calculated pragmatism. It is also significant to recognise that Federal Government is involved in a very pragmatic relationship, via the college infrastructure, with Sarah and several thousand other young people. This is a kind of mutual 'using' of each other via the education system - a mutual 'holding pattern' - to meet other agendas. For Sarah it is important to be there for the social project. For the Government, unemployment figures are lower than they otherwise would be.

What looks superficially like a win/win situation is actually more sinister. The relationship is not just pragmatic, enacted *in spite of* the goals of the other. Each party is seeking short-term gain, but acting counter to sustainable patterns for themselves. The relationship careers towards a mutual self-sabotage. Just as the government jeopardises its own education system because of a glut of students who simply do not see the relevance of being there, so Sarah jeopardises her own life-chances. (Also at stake is the learning of students who do want to be at school.)

Avoiding formal program requirements without publicly contesting formal definitions involves 'artful dodging'. Artful dodging usually leads to getting 'hassled'. The lived experience of school and work is about artful dodging and being hassled (like Sarah, above, and like Ben when he gets his job-search payments cut for non-compliance). Amidst systems that are increasingly punitive and coercive, getting caught-out simply means that more creativity is required in the dodging next time.

Artful dodging is also present in relationships with unemployment programs and employers. It can be seen when individuals find ways to fill in job-search forms with minimal effort, when they take a break whenever possible at work, or find ways to weasel out of work contracts with college teachers. In this case each is instrumental to the frustration of the other, but more than this - they reflect *mutual disengagement with the other*.

Just as many young people are failing to engage in school, other writers (eg. see Connell 1994; Wyn and White 1997) point to the ways in which schools are in many cases failing to engage in the most central issues of young people's lives. Preoccupation with a questionable 'mainstream' of contented students ignores the needs of many other students (Dwyer 1996).

At worst, in the cases of education and welfare these relationships are based on a lose/lose contract. While those respondents who are unemployed are creatively rorting the (however inappropriate) system, welfare agencies and staff are spending more and more resources surveying and controlling those in their care (see Wyn and White 1997). Teachers are spreading resources more thinly chasing up reluctant students, while the said students are often quite cheerfully undermining their own future life-chances.

As other research has demonstrated (Willis 1979; Connell et al. 1982) the creative exercise of agency does not always lead to an improvement of life-chances. Young people's creative practices of engagement - immersion in alternative programs - their practices of creatively making other lives - can be understood as manifestations of the will to live, the will to socially engage, the will to story and to find meaning in day to day life. As such these programs can be heralded as evidence of young



people's survival strategies and as meaningful projects in their own right. They also, however, represent the ways in which kids can quite willingly and creatively be involved in the process of diminishing their own life-chances.

Often, marginalized young people are presented in research and literature as angry or upset, as anti-authoritarian, as overtly resisting institutional controls (eg: see Willis 1979), or even as quietly wounded conscientious objectors (see Presdee 1990). These respondents, though, present several different pictures. Except those 'retreating', they show few signs of anger, they are not mobilized 'against', not an organized resistance, or a conscious counter-culture. Many of them are just kids who are dispossessed and doing time or doing other things, *within* current institutional arrangements.

The overtly angry are those who have often publicly contested formal definitions loudly enough to be removed from the school environment. They are the ones who quit school between the first and second rounds of interviews. Through the processes of sampling used in this research we have already missed the input of the really-early-school leavers (not for want of trying). Perhaps the missing males would significantly change the tone of the 'retreating' ideal-type? The young women represented in this corner of the typology have also largely (3 out of 4) silenced themselves within the study and stayed absent from the school / job-search environment.

Around one half of the respondents who stayed in this study, though, by their own admission and/or by what we can observe, do not neatly 'fit' the structures that are there to 'process' or to shepherd them. These are the ones who want to be settling (but for reasons well beyond their control have not been able to do that yet). They are the perennially wandering and the silently retreating. Although these are local cultural patterns, we need to be clear that the dilemmas they face are not simply a reflection on the Geeveston kids. Other research suggests that the comfortable 'mainstream' is a myth, and that there are many more young people who are marginalized by current arrangements than policy makers would like to think (see Dwyer 1996). What we can see from the Geeveston research is how some much broader social patterns are played out in the lived experience of one small, localized group of individuals.

In particular, there is a good fit between post-compulsory education to 'exploring' as a cultural orientation. Only certain types of stories, certain histories of trust, certain negotiation strategies (ie. plan and project), leave respondents equipped not simply to *get to* further education, but to *make use of it*. A growing body of other literature also points to the growing gap between retention levels and students' active participation (eg. see Abbott-Chapman et al. 1989; Dwyer et al. 1990; Cunningham et al. 1992; Dwyer 1996). New research suggests that according to employers, many school leavers exit without 'the basic skills to make them employable' (Semmens 2000).

It is equally significant to note the links between class and accessibility of education. Although not all of those who are 'exploring' are middle class, *all (except 2) of the middle class respondents are 'exploring'*. Education is the breeding ground of the powerful, but, in the stories told in this research, it is clear that it is a most accessible to those already most powerful. This study manifests some patterns already familiar from other writing (eg. Bourdieu 1973). *All of the other diversities that have been discussed in this chapter, and all of their associated perils, primarily belong to working class kids.*

### **Things we can learn from engaging with these stories**

The major contribution of this chapter has related to how we might conceptualize young people's transitions. 'Static' ways of conceptually mapping young people's transitions make little sense of the diverse and ever-changing patterns in these respondents' trajectories (and the youth transitions literature shows that this is a common research problem). In order to understand the things taking place, ways of writing more dynamic, processual accounts are needed. This chapter has presented one such account.

Because objective, distant and statistical records of institutional attachments and/or student 'outcomes' say nothing about young people's lived experiences of these transitions, they have very limited potential to tell us about what young people are actually doing. Understanding what young people themselves are doing - and able to do - becomes particularly relevant in a social climate of increasingly precarious

employment opportunities, increasingly circumscribed welfare provision, and increasingly coercive school retention policies. It is only through talking with these individuals that we can really get a sense of what they *are* doing.

The chapter shows how an interpretive approach actually makes much more sense of the patterns in respondents' lives, and can lead to a much richer way of mapping their movements. The approach – which focuses on their *practices of engagement* – is processual rather than static, and thematic rather than specific. It is essentially about relationships – here it is about the ongoing relationships between young people and the institutions that shepherd, train and employ them. Even more fundamentally, though, it is about the relationship between – on the one hand – young people's stories of what they find meaningful and valued, and – on the other hand – the options that they find open to them.

In terms of empirical findings, the chapter shows how respondents are *engaging* very differently in school, work and job-search programs. It shows how their own informal agendas can either complement or cut right across their more formal commitments. It reveals some exponential or spiralling patterns in respondents' lives showing: firstly, how what is meaningful, that is, what is happening in respondents' stories, continually shapes their practices of engagement (in this case with school, work and job-seeking); and secondly, how what is happening vis-a-vis these significant institutional attachments and day-to-day encounters impacts upon their stories about identity, meaning, and their desires to engage. Respondents' lived experiences are varied, and while some are finding themselves well supported in major life-projects, others' lived experiences of school, work and unemployment are much more about doing time, getting by, daydreaming, artful dodging, and avoiding hassle. In the ways that we think about such stories, we should not be simply focussing on individuals' failure to fit into a given system, but a much greater mismatch of history and expectations. These are stories about individuals who have no way of engaging with institutions that never really engaged with them – and the things that were meaningful to them – in the first place.

Of course, how young people are able to engage in the social world at all depends upon their ability to access some significant social resources. This will be the focus of chapter 7.

## 7. Resources

Young people have access to different resources for the project of making a life. Everything discussed in earlier chapters is pointing towards this one central theme. Reviews of other Australian studies clearly demonstrate that young people have different levels of access to some practical things that help each to make a life, for example education, healthcare, work, and housing. Meanwhile, other research shows that growing up in rural areas can further limit access to many of these important things (chapter 2). Within *this* rural study, respondents' own stories have highlighted significant differences in their exposure to, and familiarity with, geographical, social, and 'systemic' worlds (chapter 4). In turn, they have had access to different cultural ways of negotiating the changes that face them (chapter 5). So individuals' current practices of engagement in their work, school, and welfare-based options are a direct result of being differently resourced for these encounters (chapter 6). When respondents were re-interviewed in 1997 and 1999, the issue of differing access to resources was highlighted yet again.

Before the third round of interviews, interested respondents had each been given a pack of their own interview transcripts and essays from 1995 and '97. In 1999, four years after their first interviews and essays, most were interested in looking back. While some clearly re-engaged with these versions of their own stories as resources, others did not. The conversations and interviews that followed were both varied and fascinating. By this time respondents' trajectories were taking very different directions, and in later encounters we had a chance to reflect on the developments together. This process reinforced some earlier ideas, but it also yielded significant new material.

Most significantly, these second and third interviews show something of the *extent* to which individuals are being differently equipped, or resourced, and also how different *starting points multiply* or increase themselves *within individuals' lives over time*. This chapter will present a picture of some of the most clear and profound differences that emerge, particularly from these moments of reflection with respondents. For most of the chapter, my aim is to draw out and name the different types of resources that feature within these young people's stories, and the

implications of these for their projects of making a life. Later in the chapter I will place particular emphasis on the way that combinations of resources (or the lack of them) are working together, compounding individual and group situations, to make respondents' life-chances profoundly different to each other. It is important to unpack these things in detail precisely because of their subtlety, their pervasiveness, but also their power to shape lives and lived experience. The following chapter (ch. 8) will look more closely at 'resource flows'; at the everyday processes and dynamics of resource distribution. Through their own stories, respondents will take part in explaining *how* their different resources are becoming available to them.

### **Different types of resources**

A resource is something that is available, and something that is useful. It can be any source of aid or support for a given project. The project of making a life is the one under scrutiny here, and so how young people are doing this, and with what, become key concerns. Resources for making a life can be any source of aid or support that is being used in that endeavour, whether accessed deliberately or by force of habit. This definition opens up a vast area of inquiry.

As shown in chapter 2, the idea that kids have access to different resources is a well documented one. The reality is, though, that not all different types of resources are self-evident, or well covered in the 'youth' literature. In fact, in the field, we often work within very 'thin' (in an ethnographic sense) readings of young people's resources. Analysis can be superficial, focusing only on immediately obvious, concrete factors (eg. job opportunities). When we as researchers talk to young people with such thin stories guiding our questions and analysis, we will not hear any more than this. Within young people's stories there are actually a whole range of far less tangible but equally (if not more) powerful resources in use - things like language, culture, symbol, and meaning. The aim here is to thicken-up descriptions about young people's resources to include these.

Meanwhile, some of the most powerful discussion about access to resources is within broader sociological analyses (eg. the class and social reproduction literature). These works focus upon more hidden structural forces, which, for young people, can seem to have little resonance with their own lived experience. Although links between

social structure and individual lives may be quite clear to analysts, young people can have very little language for the wider patterns that we talk about (Dwyer and Wyn 1997; Wyn and White 1998). This issue has been well covered in the 'youth' literature: as individualistic frameworks where young people could not comprehend the situation in a larger picture (Dwyer and Wyn 1997); as individuals' ignorance or denial of structural factors (Dwyer et al. 1998); as young people's individualized approaches (Wyn and White 1998); and as part of the 'epistemological fallacy of late modernity' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

Here I am suggesting an approach that is neither a distant structural analysis, nor a thin story about young people's practical resources. If we listen closely to young people's stories – listen for the layers within their stories - we can hear that they are drawing upon many rich layers of different resources. That is, *they* will tell *us* about social structure and social process. An example should make this clearer.

Suzy has a history of wagging school, getting expelled, and different kinds of recreational and habitual drug use. In our third interview, over café lattes and lunch, she raises the question about how, in the light of these things, she came to be doing OK in school now, while her friends are still 'hanging around in the Mall and on methadone'. Significant factors include that she was able to move towns, to go to different colleges and schools, and that her parents were well enough equipped to afford her trying several schooling options. However, there are countless layers of other things that she has been making use of - to get to where she is now. Listen to her explain:

Suzy: ... um so he (old acquaintance) asked me what I was doing with myself now. He was very very very surprised to hear that I was in year 12 - for a start like the look of shock on his face was like (laughs) you know like he thought I'd be a bum or something!

AW: Well you could have gone either way really couldn't you?

Suzy: Yeah, well definitely I made the choice for myself to keep going and do it.

AW: You made the choice - what made you make the choice - like when did you feel that the choice?

Suzy: ... I made the choice half way through grade 10...

AW: So there was a decision point?

Suzy: Yeah I realized this is not the life for me - what am I ever going to do with myself if I don't go to school.

AW: You can remember consciously thinking that?

Suzy: Yeah. Like I base it on grade 9 - 'cos like in grade 9 I had a lot of friends who were like street-kids and stuff from town - like I know them all and they're still friends - I just don't hang around with them (laughs). I don't want to be part of that life - and - I took a look at them and that's what made me - I don't want to be like that - I don't want to have nothing better to do than sit in the Mall all day - pretty boring. Yeah, so it was the fact that they had no - nothing to - I'm going to have a smoke before we eat. (pause.) Yeah that's just it - and because of what they're doing they're never going to have the chance to change that really. I mean that they might but it's going to be bloody hard. (Suzy 3:7)

This conversation captures the dialectic relationship between, on the one hand, the lived experience of making choices, and on the other, people being resourced differently in order to negotiate the social world. Suzy made a choice, and there is no doubting the significance of that defining moment. As the result of a defining moment like this one, the world is storied differently, engaged with differently, and negotiated differently. No matter whether this story is understood as resourcing her changes of direction back then (or whether accounts are seen to be post-facto rationalizations, authored to make sense of action in retrospect, like in Schutz 1976), this is a point only of academic debate and almost irrelevant. Suzy's stories are the resources that make current directions meaningful and worth engaging in. As such, they are crucial to social processes, and to her project of making a life.

More to the point though, in her storytelling about this incident, Suzie is in fact *listing the resources that she draws upon* in order to negotiate the world in the way that she does.

Firstly, she draws on preferences, understandings or cultural definitions: about the potential value of education ('what am I ever going to do with myself if I don't go to school'); about the meanings surrounding time ('I don't want to have nothing better

to do than sit in the Mall all day’); and about the emphasis placed on individual agency, perseverance and hard work (‘I made the choice myself to keep going and do it’).

She is drawing on understandings about self and identity (‘I don’t want to be like that’), on a well rehearsed story of progress (‘Like I base it on grade nine’) with a ‘turning point’ (‘I made the choice’) and an empowering punch-line (‘like the look of shock on his face was like... you know like he thought I’d be a bum or something!’).

But there is still more going on here. Suzy is also drawing upon cultural practices that are familiar to her, or habits as resources: viewing self through the eyes of another (‘he was very very very surprised to hear that I was in year 12’); self-analysis, self-awareness or reflexivity (‘I realised that this is not the life for me’); self-talk or self-coaching practices (‘what am I ever going to do with myself if I don’t go to school’); exercising subjectivity or ‘analytical separation’ from the flows of activity that are going on around her (‘like I know them all and they’re still friends, I just don’t hang around with them’); and contrasting self to others; ‘them’ and ‘me’ (‘I took one look at them and that’s what made me - I don’t want to be like that’).

Each of these types of resource will be fleshed out later in this chapter. The key point here though, is the value in *‘thickening’ our stories* about young people and their *differently available resources*. Each of the layers listed above can be recognised as significant and overlaying resources for the ways in which Suzy is able to negotiate the social world, to engage, and to make a life. Thick, grounded stories, and multiple levels of analysis are required to do justice to these.

Time and again, through each respondent’s stories, patterns in the use of different kinds of resources are being revealed. As above, these resources are *practical* (the real-world-easy-to-see type); they are *symbolic* (individuals actually ‘speak their tools’ for making sense of lived experience); and they are *embodied in practices* (for example, different habits).

Table 2 shows how these differ from each other. Practical resources are things which individuals tangibly and concretely make use of in day-to-day life (eg. money).



Resources of meaning and symbol are specifically about the way in which individuals and groups make sense of themselves and the world around them. Resources of habit and practice are also cultural resources – these are the things that individuals and groups ‘do’.

**Table 2: Different types of resources-at-hand**

Type of resource	Examples of resource
Practical resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• transport</li> <li>• education</li> <li>• healthcare</li> <li>• shelter</li> </ul>
Resources of meaning and symbol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conceptual frameworks /schemes</li> <li>• definitions of identity</li> <li>• stocks of knowledge</li> <li>• language</li> <li>• preferences / orientations</li> </ul>
Resources of habit and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• habits of storytelling</li> <li>• doing abstraction</li> <li>• engaging in others’ stories</li> </ul>

These 3 layers (practical, symbolic and habit) are, in one sense, artificial distinctions, because in real life individuals’ ‘resources-in-use’ are all woven inextricably together (and we will return to the implications of this at the end of the chapter). But, just as teasing apart the threads in a piece of fabric leads to an awareness of the strength of the weave, easing these layers apart can help observers to see each more clearly, and to recognize the complexity and strength of the ‘weave’ within recurring social patterns and within individual lives.

## Resources-out-there vs. resources-at-hand

To be 'resourced' implies that resources are not just available, but that they are being accessed by the agent in question. In the earlier quote, Suzy is mentioning, in turn, *only* her 'resources-at-hand'. Resources-at-hand are the things which respondents are using to help them negotiate the social world. Resources-at-hand can be counted *only in their use* by individuals and groups. They manifest both in the content and in the form of social practice. Likewise they emerge in our contacts and interviews; explicit or implicit within the things that are said, and embodied in the things that are done.

'Resources-at-hand' are distinct from 'resources-out-there' or 'resources-on-offer' which may or may not be accessible to kids, even if third parties and outsiders think that they are or should be (for example, see chapter 5 regarding different students' access to continuing education). The *only* significant unit of analysis for this chapter, therefore, is respondents' 'resources-in-use' or 'resources-at-hand'. Emphasis remains firmly upon the individual or social group, and *what they are doing, and able to do, with what resources*. If this approach is adopted, implications also arise for research, policy and for interventions with young people (more on this later).

## Practical resources

Practical resources are the visible and tangible supports for making a life. They include such things as food, shelter, safe and effective ways of getting from 'A' to 'B' (transport), education, work, and healthcare. An extensive body of Australian 'youth' research has already covered these things. This study, as longitudinal research, also shows how early access to practical resources becomes multiplied within individual lives over time.

Just as practical resources become breeding grounds for other resources, the converse is also true. The lives under study here demonstrate that there is a strong relationship between lack of provision for basic needs, and lack of access to other resources. This also echoes the stories of respondents in other studies (eg. see White 1997a). In the Geeveston re-interviews it soon becomes clear that the lack of the basics - a safe home, of transport, of healthcare, food, - over time, are encroaching on the more

complex and creative projects of making a life - ie. relationships, passions, educational qualifications, ability to find and sustain work.

The issue of *shelter* is very significant. William highlights the cycles and 'catch 22s' involved in not having a safe home. He lives at Arthur's Caravan Park ('because it's cheap!').

AW: So living there - what sort of things do you have to deal with?

Will: Having to pay for showers and washing every couple of days ...

AW: Other things?

Will: That it's very cold. (William 3:5)

Poverty leads to more poverty - a lack of permanent solutions forces William into a lifestyle of more costly options. He often runs a fan heater and pays to use a laundromat. As his mum (Bron) suggests, young people find it hard to get other aspects of life under control when home is a wild frontier:

Bron: It makes it hard on 'em 'cos - caravan park it's not fit for a dog over there - that's how it is - to live decently there's not enough money there for them. And if he wants to stay living in that kind of lifestyle, yeah they make it - but for something decent - the government should do something like say you find the place and we'll pay the rent for you - to get 'em out because then that caravan park, it is a rut.

AW: Is it full of other people doing the same?

Bron: Yes - and the biggest half of them are adults who are alcoholics - they don't put 'em in anything decent - 'cos their money won't stretch to that.

AW (to William): So what is it like as a neighbourhood?

Will: It's not good. You walk around the park and there's a heap of drunks there - and they're all carrying on being idiots - yellin' and screaming - playing music - really don't make no sense to nobody - just causing havoc.

AW: Do you feel like you're unsafe?

Will: I have been lately, feeling unsafe, 'cos I keep getting' broken into. People keep crawlin' though me window and seeing what they can 'ave.

AW: How does that make you feel?

Will: Bit worried when I leave the unit unattended.

Bron: Yeah we laugh about him - we say caravan park's got 'im on a rubber band - 'e walks out 'e gets pulled back! (Bron and William, 3:6)

If William leaves his caravan for long, his experience tells him that his belongings will be stolen. He explains that this precludes other options like visiting mates or seeking work. In effect, the poverty and crime in William's community also gets in the way of his own attempts to make a life. The literature on community and poverty, community and crime, or crime and social cohesion reveals detrimental effects on the life chances of those living in unsafe communities, or communities where poverty is an issue (see White 2001).

Like an unsafe community, home that is full of stress or conflict can also hamper engagement with the world:

'Cause umm I last year and the year before, I used to always stay in my room. Like I'm a very roomy person. I just stay in there. And then I got sick, I had glandular fever. Then I stayed there even more. But this year, I've like come out more and sit in the lounge room and see what's going on and stuff like that... I think since things have settled down... But everything's calmed down now... I think that's why. Cause I'm, I can't stand confront-ion stuff, I'd just rather sit back and watch if it. If there's a fight going on. (Elizabeth, 2 829:857)

A safe home is not just a physically safe home. For Beth, living with her father's alcohol issues also meant a survival rather than creative mode of living: 'Well that was it, wasn't it? I was trapped in a way.' (Beth, 2:7). Other resources and relationships are affected too. For Fiona, a domestic refugee, the share-house that she moved into actually led to significant social stigma, and this still complicates her life four years later:

Gosh I still cop crap about that - about when I used to live with four guys  
- about where I used to live - that really upset me because I was going out  
with one of them and not all of them... (Fiona 3:10)

Fiona tells the story of how Dads' new wife 'drove her out' of home. Her story, like the others, shows how other far more subtle but fundamental things (eg. in her case social reputation and community acceptance, even years later) are also at stake in the quest for a safe home.

*Transport (safe ways of moving around)* is an issue for lots of kids, but particularly for rural kids. Put simply, the 'tyranny of distance' adds one more degree of difficulty to things that are already challenges. So while going to school year-after-year may be hard, getting on a bus at 7.30 every morning and getting home just before tea-time makes it even harder.

Respondents explain that it is also logistically more difficult to engage with the social world when all the 'action' is further away. Other research with rural young people (ie. Hillier et al. 1996) lists sexual exploitation as a direct result of transport issues, (ie. sex is a trade-off for getting a lift). While this study did not reveal the same, other more subtle forms of oppression and confinement are operating. Jasmine explains that when she stays over at friends' houses in the city, so that they can all go out, she ends up doing things that she later regrets. The evening's activities are negotiated on others people's terms, and this means a significant loss of autonomy and control, and compromises that scare her. So rather than going out: 'I prefer to stay home - because at least then I know that I'm not going to get into any trouble.' (Jasmine 3:7)

*Food / Nutrition* is also a significant issue. Geeveston District High School staff identify that some students come to school without having had breakfast and that this is affecting energy, performance levels and concentration in class. Staff also explain that there is a strong relationship between this and students' socio-economic background.

*Economic stability* is central to this picture. A lack of money means that other things also become beyond reach. This is true within individual lives, within families, and

within entire social settings. For whole Australian communities (as discussed in ch. 2) rural decline presents a prime example of this.

*Healthcare* is easy to overlook as an issue if provisions are there. However, among all of those interviewed, only working-class families reported problems with 'ADHD', alcoholism, epilepsy, and with the ability to cope as a parent because of debilitating physical illness. Although the middle-class families involved in the research may well have confronted some similar concerns, the fact that only *some* respondents raised them in interviews points to broader social issues. It points to the differential distribution of resources which assist with management of these health conditions, but also the structural conditions that foster the problems in the first place. Only for some, these become issues that would impinge upon working, schooling, and upon futures. Within this study, like other studies (eg. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2000), these can be quite clearly seen as classed differences.

#### *Practical resources: the implications*

This list of relevant practical resources is potentially limitless (eg. local work options, qualifications). The point here, though, is that each resource multiplies within individual lives, in turn providing links to other practical resources. Two other significant implications arise from *all* respondents' stories.

*Firstly, access to practical resources means more choices.* Access to extra practical resources manifest in the ways that individuals and their families have more options for confronting challenges, or more ways of making hard things work. Continuing education becomes tricky for rural kids, but Emma can live in the city. The kids who go to university are either those whose families have the resources to move to Sandy Bay (university suburb) for the duration, or who have infrastructures in place to send their children elsewhere to live.

Access to practical resources means that individuals have more choices in the ways that they engage with the world, and also in the ways that they story the world. Examples shared earlier (in chapter 4) include the flow-on-effects of geographical travel and exposure. This manifests within individuals' lives and stories, later, as

increased scope in available geographical, social (networks) and institutional worlds of resources which they draw upon. Access to these practical resources has meant expanded opportunities for creativity.

Differences in access to options also manifest in conversations and in follow-up-interviews. Although one group is locally resourced, and the other is more globally resourced, among those 'exploring' and 'settling', most choices are flanked by multiple good options - a platform for creativity. Pete's interview starts in the following way:

Um, I was just finished year 12 and on holidays and I'm not knowing what to do next year... I've been thinking all through college to go to Uni, but just the last month or so I've been thinking to go away for a year. Just travel around Australia or something and then go to Uni.  
(Pete, 2 23:38)

and Dale's:

...but I like it... [heavy warehouse work]... Uh - one day - if I didn't work in another job, and done this (gestures at home grown part-time business) full-time I'd make a lot more money than I do... When I started it was just a hobby. (Dale 3:10)

For others (particularly those 'wandering' and 'retreating'), options are more limited:

Oh the social security just rang up one day and said that they had work and that was it - I sort of didn't have a choice in the matter. (Laughs)  
(William 3:4)

*Secondly, access to practical resources means more chances.* Access to practical resources (eg. safe homes, ways of getting around, work options) means that individuals have more chances to 'stuff up' with relative impunity. Most kids are able to engage in experimentation, exploration, play with options, some even severing links with work or school (like Suzy). However, in terms of reconnections with these institutions, *only some can find their way back*. For others, hastily-made

decisions or 'cluster movements' mark the beginning of more narrowly defined careers and dramatically reduced institutional support. An earlier deviation becomes the basis of an alternative or 'deviant' career.

Ben and Simon have trouble attending classes in year 11, and they stop going. Their families are neither geographically nor economically well situated to shop for a suitable school to accommodate them. Once they quit school, issues of geographical 'stuckness' and local peer culture work together to keep each of them well locked into their previous choices:

Only went to a couple of classes - spent the rest of the time just mucking around with me friends. Then I quit - I haven't been doing much really... a lot of them spending time in the bush smoking dope - that's what I was doing. (Ben, 3:1)

At the same time, their own networks are able to offer little by way of work, or other legal means of support. These things shape not just who gets named as naughty, but to whom the label sticks (see Becker 1963), who gets told not to come back to school, and who can go elsewhere and start again. Other studies have shown how access to resources impacts on criminalization processes (eg. see Mounsey 1997). Meanwhile at a community level, issues of locational disadvantage, social cohesion and social exclusion dovetail to create social climates for criminal activity (White 2001).

To 'choose to change' is a manoeuvre reserved for the more privileged. In this context, Suzy's (earlier) story reads like the tale of a 'cat with nine lives'. Suzy's Uncle owns a bookshop, her mother owns a café, and each is a setting in which she can find work. These things become effective buffer-zones between Suzy and potential crisis. When someone's parents are co-owners of the system, by birthright, they get more chances to 'get it wrong', to change their minds, or to change course in mid-flight. This is important. Other research shows that complicated 'transitions' (in and out of home, in and out of work, in and out of school) are increasingly becoming a reality for Australian young people (see chapter 5, also Dwyer 2000; Holden 1992; Looker and Dwyer 1997). Having links to significant practical



resources (in this case, safe homes, other schools, work options) potentially makes these juggles and transitions far less hostile.

On the basis of these stories, young people's access to practical resources could be said to serve a 2-fold function, both in providing *greater options for creativity in their negotiations and engagements*, and also in creating a layer of *protection around said negotiations and engagements*. In a time where citizens are increasingly placed as 'consumers', (Wyn and White 1997) and lifestyle 'choice' is heralded as a way of life (see White and Wyn 1998), this is a critical issue.

Access to practical resources is actually shielding many of kids from external risks. This becomes very significant if we accept that we are part of a global society where risk and uncertainty are also growing issues (see Beck 1992; also Furlong and Cartmel 1997). In a 'risk society', access to economic resources and related practical resources act as buffer-zones, and risks are shifted onto others. Likewise, in a national economy that 'requires' a certain level of unemployment in order to have a ready army of wage-labourers, Suzy is now in school *and* working, while Ben and Simon are (usually) unemployed.

#### *Other kinds of resources*

Practical, tangible, and physical resources like those outlined above are hugely significant in shaping kids' lives. However, repeat interviews reveal that other kinds of resources - of meaning and identity, of habit and practice (refer back to earlier scheme) - are also powerful carriers of social birthright.

The differences between individuals' stories are subtle but profound. Follow-up-interview transcripts were 'coded' using 'Atlas' (a program which facilitates fine-grained qualitative analysis of texts). Although 391 codes were used to catalogue the contrasts and patterns in the data (see Appendix C), many of the most poignant became familiar and 'saturated' after fully processing only 12 interviews. Some strong themes were evident, and echoed in all of the other texts. The focus turned to the less-tangible resources-at-hand: firstly resources of meaning and symbol and secondly resources of habit and practice.

## Resources of meaning and symbol

In interviews, *individuals speak their tools* for making sense of the world. Diverse sets of meanings - about identity and reality - form different resource-bases for negotiating and engaging with the social world. The character of things is mediated by symbols (Mead 1955:125). Individuals represent and interact with the world through these symbols (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Blumer 1969; Strauss 1977; Stryker 1980). Like practical resources, within respondents' stories and lives, these more symbolic resources are also multiplying over time. Interview data is full of examples of this.

### *Resources of identity: 'me'*

In interviews, individuals are drawing on definitions of, and stories about identities in at least two ways. Firstly, using phrases like 'what I do', 'what I don't do', 'what I like', 'what I hate', 'I'm always...' and 'I never...' individuals are framing and outlining different conceptions of 'self' and their varied, recognizable social faces of 'me'. Grounded within histories, these have implications for futures, providing recipes, proscriptions, prescriptions, and sets of permissions, for different negotiations and engagements (eg. 'I could do this 'cos I'm...'; or 'I could do this 'cos I usually do...'). While the significance of such stories emerged with early interviews (refer back to ch. 4), it presented even more clearly in repeat interviews, by which time respondents' increasingly different engagements were feeding back into more concrete and defined definitions of themselves. Examples include:

- I'm going to be a secretary => I'm half-way qualified to be a secretary
- Rebel => activist
- 'Homeboy' => potential music DJ
- Outdoors person => adventure tour guide

These resources multiply and they have the power to shape lives. Five years of hindsight reveal the power of being able to tell clear stories of 'past, present future and me', in terms of accessing other resources. In contrast, individuals who earlier told unclear stories, have been ill-equipped to powerfully negotiate changes (see

chapter 5), and are having trouble engaging meaningfully with ongoing school and work-focused institutions (see chapter 6).

Stories about identity are being used by respondents in at least one other significant way. Some respondents are telling different kinds of stories - in order to 'go against the flow' - to armour themselves against perceived external pressures, conditions or expectations. Sonia's stories - about being 'different' to her friends - have become an integral part of her 'moral career' (Goffman 1961) as a conscientious student:

Yeah I try my hardest in classes - yeah and if I got a project or something to do and I know I'm not going to get on I start stressing out about it. (Sonia 3:7)

Identity definitions are about claiming and owning certain ways of engaging in the world. These stories about 'me' can form a symbolic shield that can effectively deflect external pressure or attack:

I can't really see the point in people coming here and not going to class - what's the point in coming really - it's stupid. (Sonia 3:7)

So rather than undermining these stories, real or perceived onslaughts by the 'other' provide new material:

...and one of my friends said before 'you know you've changed heaps - you never used to be like that - to state your own opinion'. I used to follow but now I'm not a follower any more, I do what I want. (Sonia 3:11)

Such stories do not only deflect the sting of difference, but employ or make use of it: claiming the difference as right, legitimate, or preferable. The description of 'the other' has become a necessary component of this self-definition:

It's like with um one friend she's always had somebody with her, like she won't do anything on her own, like she's always got to have someone with her. She won't even ring up somebody to ask about something like

- Centrelink - she wanted to get a job at BiLo summertime - and she said: 'Do you want to come, do you want to come?' and I said: 'No I don't want to work there 'cos I've got this other thing lined up.' and, she didn't go. She didn't go 'cos she didn't have anyone to go with. She didn't go 'cos she's a follower - like she's always just stuck with other people.  
(Sonia 3: 11-12)

Time also features in these stories. Individuals who have been most powerful, most directed, in their own negotiations also have clear stories about the difference between past and now, now and future.

One thing that's changed lot since probably grade, maybe grade 10 is I've really learned to put my foot down like somebody would say to me: Let's go do this.' and I'd say: 'OK' 'cos they wanted to or something *but now* if I don't want to do something I'll just say I don't want to do something like they won't force me and it's like: 'No I don't want to do it just drop it, OK?'. (Sonia 3: 11-12)

Like practical resources (eg. cars, computers) such definitions and resources of meaning can open possibilities or close them down. It all depends upon who 'I' am, who 'they' are, what 'then' means and what 'now' means. These things depend upon the different culturally available options.

Stories about identity should not be overlooked in any exploration of young people's most significant, and differently available resources. Definitions of identity can function just like practical resources. Firstly, they multiply within individuals' lives. Secondly, as recipes, possibilities, or a set of permissions for creative negotiations and engagements with the world, and thirdly, they are being used as a protective or fortifying interface for negotiations with others in everyday life.

There is also a significant relationship between this type of resource – symbolic resources (in this case, related to identity) and the practical resources mentioned earlier. In defining self in certain ways, individuals literally define themselves into or out of practical possibilities (eg. going on to education, or 'I don't go to doctors'). This is as powerful a force as any practical barrier to access.

### *Resources of identity: 'we'*

Young people's understandings about 'we' are also easily overlooked as significant resources with which they can negotiate. Beyond peer groups and youth subcultures, among youth studies there is usually little analysis of the power of 'we'. Among these respondents, though, stories about 'me' are enmeshed with stories about 'my people' (be they family, peers, mentors, or community). For most respondents in this study, the frequency of spontaneous 'we'-references suggests that membership of inter-generational groups (clans) is far more central to identity and story than peer-group membership.

Understandings about 'we' locate individuals in social space and time - not just within their present company, but (for the luckier ones) among those who have gone before and those who will come after them. 'Predecessors' and 'successors' are very significant in making sense of life-course and status-passage (Strauss 1977:10). In interviews, respondents are creating understandings about the themes that are important to them (eg. self-reliance, a close community) by invoking a company of those present, predecessors and successors:

One thing most of *the Jamisons* [my family] like to do is go out bush and get [fire]wood ... Oh Forestry does sell it, but *we just collect it for ourselves*. (Noah 2, 500:501)

Wherever but I know I wouldn't want to go on living in the city. In any city. I don't like them. Too, too crowded. Too many people and like here and like *we have our own little town* where I live, all the um neighbours and that are all really close. And it's just really nice to know that *if you need something, then you can go and call on them...* Yeah. The country would be a better place *to bring kids up*, I reckon. (Alyssa 2, 312:335)

While the embodied experience of existing 'here and now' is one focus of everyday life, for some respondents, dreaming, planning, and thinking ahead are also significant. Anticipated future company are engaged as recipient, audience or witnesses:

Just things that, like I've always planned to - as kids we've always gone to Dover for Christmas and I've always wanted to do that with my family as well... All the stuff I've grown up with, I want to give my kids the same. (Mmmm hmmm.) Like the way my, like with my Dad, he likes going fishing or, just taking the kids out in the boat or going down the beach. You know, going camping, that sort of person. And I've always enjoyed that, as when I think back now I always think back like all the fun times I've had camping and stuff like that, with all Dad's mates just seeing everybody happy. (Hmm.) Like we've always had great fun down there, and that's one thing I want to do as well. (Yeah.) And, I don't know if there'd be anything else really. (Sonia, 2 763:800)

For others, future plans involve, instead, a quest to balance the ledger of history:

I don't want to be one of those families where you know, one of the parents isn't there ... I want [my kids] to have a nice normal family life like I've never had (laughs). I really want to do it. (Fiona 3:4)

These stories, and the company within them, become a core part of what individuals are about.

Respondents' available understandings of 'we' are functioning like other resources. They multiply over time - identities can be sources of mobilization as much as products of it. That is, the way people understand themselves shapes action, which shapes the way that they understand themselves. 'We' is also central to respondents' ability to be creative. A large proportion of respondents' repertoires about 'I' are made up from components of 'we'. If there are limited 'we's that kids can draw upon, there are also very few 'I's, and correspondingly, very few options and permissions. These give rise to 'thin' stories about possibilities for 'me'.

At their best, 'we' forums do not simply mean options for creativity, but also protection for the young within the company of the pack. Nearly all of the respondents share abundant 'we' stories, as testaments to the fact that large parts of their journeys through life are shared. At the same time, rituals and family traditions

are anchoring many, providing focus or reflecting back (like a mirror) some 'embodied' stories about who 'we' are and what is important. *Together, significant themes are being lived as much as spoken:*

AW: Yeah. Do you reckon you'd be back for holidays?

Mel: Oh yeah, definitely. Christmas especially. I love Christmas together. (Yeah?) 'Cause all our family gets together at Nanna and Gramps and Auntie Jenny and my cousins, and my cousins from 7 Mile Beach will all go to my house.

AW: Every year?

Mel: Yeah. Tradition. (Yeah.) For roast.

AW: Same food?

Mel: Mmm hmm. Same food. Chicken, ham, turkey... Gramps always carves the meat. Tradition... Yeah. I like a bit of tradition. I like some things different, but things like that I like to keep going. (Mel 3, 1073:1117)

Shared traditions provide not just rich sources of material for individuals as they plan futures (as above), but also places of return, of security, when life changes or when the world seems a little crazy:

Just of a night-time we sit around the fire ... We've all camped together and sat around the fire of a night-time having some drinks - yeah it's good - keeps us out of trouble (laughs). I love camping - just the atmosphere of it - it's just different to sitting at home and you can actually lay down and look at stars ... time to get away down to the beach. (Sonia, 3:8)

### *Keeping identity in context*

'Youth' writers usually recognise the role of 'identity' in the ways that young people are able to negotiate the world. However, it is often at the point of talking about agency or powerlessness that otherwise useful analysis begins to draw solely upon psychological phenomena (like 'self-esteem') that are limited in scope and relatively hard to ground or see. This means focusing on young people's understandings about

themselves whilst ignoring how these are enmeshed within their very understandings about the worlds in which they live. Languages about these topics are usually psychological, reflecting psychology's historical domination of 'youth' writing (Wyn and White 1997; see Jones and Wallace 1992) where they need in fact to be far more phenomenological, that is, dealing with the nature of reality, experience, consciousness, and how things become known to individuals. A phenomenological approach will explore the ways in which we name, define, and typify everything around us in order to make sense of it all and get by in the world. These typifications will differ between groups. They are the basis of our assumptions about 'the world of everyday life' and also form the basis for all social action (eg. see Berger 1966).

By way of contrast – a psychological approach may look at self-concept, self esteem, models of efficacy in action, even 'locus of control' (Rotter 1966). Proponents of a psychological approach would tell us that capacity to act is directly linked to self-perception (see, for example Evans and Poole 1991). However, it is not simply self-perception that matters here, but *all of* perception. Young people's understandings of their own capabilities are framed only ever within the way that *all* of their social world is being processed and understood. This is not just an argument of semantics, but a pivotal point of this whole thesis. Issues of culture, agency, power and social difference cannot be reduced simply to issues of identity and self-concept.

Some writers have begun to ask questions about the need to look further at the lived experiences of kids themselves, perhaps through frames like a 'continuum of control' (eg. Dwyer et al. 1999). Individual agency is claimed only ever within a context of relationships with the social world. Questions follow about the kinds of different worlds these people inhabit (examples might be global/local, safe/unsafe).

In respondents' stories, issues of identity are constantly being framed within social space and time. Being able to engage in constructive negotiations with others always heavily implicates perceptions of 'me' and 'them'. Likewise, negotiating change with any sense of autonomy involves strongly storied understandings of 'self-within-time' (see chapters 5 and 6 for examples).

At issue here is not just issues of the perception and management of self, but profound differences in individuals' ability to negotiate a life *within* the social world



(direction of movement) and to negotiate *with* it (power). Put simply, when young people's identities (and the way that they think about them) are stripped of their social context (and the way that they think about this), our analysis is poorer, our policies do violence, and our interventions will not work.

### *Resources for making sense of the world*

Having said this, beyond identity, respondents have diverse resources-at-hand for making sense of the social world in which they live. The sociological tradition provides some useful (if overlapping) ways of conceptualizing these. Below is an exploration of some of the most prominent patterns in the data: 'schemata' or 'frames', 'stocks of knowledge', 'themes', 'convictions', 'language', 'orientations' and 'preferences'. The list of these could be far more exhaustive, but the examples provide a strong sense of the different symbolic resources with which respondents are working.

- *Conceptual frameworks / schemata as symbolic resources*

The basic idea here is that we make sense of the world around us, and interact with it, through symbolic representations. Fascinations with this theme have been differently pursued: for example within philosophy (Kant 1890), cognitive anthropology (Casson 1983), structural anthropology (1967; 1972; 1979) and critical structuralist sociology (Bourdieu 1977) as 'schemata'; within the symbolic interactionist tradition as frames (Goffman 1974); and by phenomenologists as 'schemes' (Schutz 1976) or 'typifications' (Berger and Luckmann 1967). The legacy of interest provides some clues as to the significance exploring of any group's basic units of understanding, if we want to understand their practice.

Goffman explains his argument more clearly than most. Primary frameworks render 'what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful' (Goffman 1974:21). Conceptual frames vary in degrees of organization and allow the user to make sense of an infinite number of concrete events.

Individuals are most likely unaware of the existence of their primary frameworks and unable to explain them. Taken together, the primary frameworks of a social group constitute central elements of its culture. If we are interested in understanding a

social group, then establishing knowledge about ‘their cosmologies’ – their ways of understanding their world is important (Goffman 1974:27).

Meanwhile, from what must be the furthest end of the sociological spectrum – the complex work of Lévi-Strauss (1967; 1972; 1979) explains that one of the best ways to understand the basic schema of any culture is in its shared stories and its myths. As a naïve outsider in the field, I have been regularly offered stories that sound familiar, which seem to be shared property of the group. They have similar content and form, and are told almost as folk-verse or poetry:

When the kids were little  
there were so many people around...  
lot of new people have moved into town  
lot of the old ones moved out  
Used to be that I knew nearly everyone in town  
and now I’m sitting in the café going  
who’s that person?  
who’s that person?  
who’s that person?

(Bron, 3:11-12)

There was a time when I knew everyone in this town -  
but now I’d be lucky to know every second person  
just in the last few years  
yeah it does, feel sad a bit  
not so safe for the kids  
Hasn’t changed business.  
Business is still really really hard.  
And jobs  
s’ no jobs for the kids  
there’s nothing down here for them any more

(Saul’s Mum Wendy, Fieldnote, April 1999)

There is a lot of new people moved down here  
 used to be  
 'know 'im, know 'im know 'im,  
 know 'er, know 'er, know 'er know 'er  
 I used to be able to name nearly every girl on the street  
 and now there's girls that, well.  
 good or bad?  
 bit of both - starting to know them

(Saul 3:3)

Apart from being rich expressions of lived experience, stories (or verses) like these hold and reveal the conceptual contrasts, the 'binary schemata', about what is significant and meaningful for this social group. The clearest expressions are about 'us and them', 'before and now', about 'known' and 'unknown'. All of these schemes are central to understanding local meaning and identity. They demarcate the things that are perceived, and also the things that are valued.

Once again, these are resources that differently equip respondents, depending upon the shape of the schema and stories permeating their own lives. While for some of the town's kids these particular binary contrasts become sources of power (creativity and / or protection), for others, they perpetuate patterns of oppression and dispossession. This shows up in earlier discussions about respondents' cultural orientations: 'exploring', 'settling', 'wandering', and 'retreating'. It all depends upon what conceptualizations of 'us' and 'them', what 'pasts', what 'nows', and the meanings of 'known' and 'unknown' that are being drawn upon. If 'we' are the little people and 'them' is all bureaucratic power, if 'we' is locals and 'them' is everyone else, if known is 'safe' and unknown is 'unsafe', then in the context of recent social changes, these schemata can be very disempowering. If 'us' is 'those who are making a go of it' versus 'those who won't', this gives both energy and meaning to the struggle. If there are broader 'us's there are a greater range of stories to draw from. If the 'unknown' has proven to be safe before, it is not going to be so intimidating.

Some conceptual frameworks of understanding are 'primary' because although they are products of previous experience, they are not usually recognised by the user as

such (Goffman 1974:21). In other language, some schemata are 'basic' because although they are creations of consciousness, cognitive constructs, they are rarely recognised as such by the user but rather, thought of as pertaining to the environment (Kant 1890; Casson 1983). They are storied and scripted into existence so tightly as to make them unnoticeable. Although products of human consciousness, they seem to be 'natural' distinctions, like 'east' and 'west' (Bourdieu 1977:14). It is not just perception, but social practice that is shaped accordingly.

For our purposes, thinking about kids and their resources, the real power in all of these ideas lies here. Put simply, understandings shape action (Weber 1947). Further, new experiences get interpreted through the conceptual frames or schemes that are already in use, and this has the tendency to fortify earlier understandings. In other words, individuals perceive certain things because they already recognise them (Mead 1955:128). This is something that shows up all too clearly in later interviews. Over time, this magnifies differences between individuals in the way that they are able to make sense their lives and their world – and how they function within these understandings.

- *'Stocks of knowledge' as symbolic resources*

Within 'The Valley', 'everybody knows everything', but some people know different things. 'Stocks of knowledge' (see Schutz 1976) are 'biographical and historical experience, objectified, retained and accumulated'. This happens across generations (Berger and Luckmann 1967:39).

Stocks of knowledge are possessed differentially (Berger and Luckmann 1967), and so can be seen as resources that have implications in terms of life-chances. Some writers suggest that in today's world, certain types of knowledge become an advantage (see Beck et al. 1994). Increasingly, prized qualities in workers include flexibility, adaptability, being multi-skilled (Wyn and White 1997). These ideas ring true in the light of the Geeveston study; where for some individuals (amidst external forces like globalization, rationalizations, population shrinkage), specialized local knowledges are becoming far less reliable sources of sustenance.

However this thesis is not about building deficit theories; respondents are *differently* equipped. During fieldwork, this was evident when all of the 'settling' young men

could easily tell me how I might go about becoming a carpenter, but Pete (a bright, 'exploring' year 12 student) could not. It was also evident when I became completely flummoxed by my car and Noah could effortlessly articulate what was wrong with it. These examples show that young people from different cultural backgrounds are not 'adequately' or 'inadequately' equipped or resourced with knowledge, but that they are accessing different stocks of knowledge, from different cultural milieux, which will give them access to different places within the social world. These in turn have different implications for life-chances (see also Willis 1979).

- *Themes as symbolic resources*

Respondents' transcripts often look more like poetry than prose (see also Richardson 1992). Their speech patterns form something like verse, around recurring thematic 'refrains':

'Cos like he killed our cat right  
about grade 8  
He drowned our cat  
was really fat 22 years old  
perfectly fit and healthy, she was just mad  
Dad just had enough of it  
and Dad didn't tell us  
and after about 3 days Tam and I are like  
where's Alice  
seen the cat -  
seen the cat -  
and like my sister loved that cat.

(Fiona 3, 8)

'Themes' are recurring clusters of ideas made explicit by respondents, and they are the issues to which they give repeated, unsolicited voice. When they recur they reveal that the speaker has been sensitized to certain issues by lived experiences. They show familiarity, recognition, that individuals or groups have been somewhere before (this need not be physical - it could be a conceptual 'somewhere').

Themes are expressed as passions, as excitement or anger, as connections between stories, as 'abundant unsolicited storytelling', as 'pop-up-issues' (where did that

come from?), and as ways of framing answers to seemingly unrelated questions. Sometimes dominant themes frame everything, for example in Fiona's interview, quoted above: I ask about career, and eventually she tells me how home was miserable (3:4); I ask a question about her anticipated marriage, and soon Fiona gets to talking about how it is time to write her father out of her life (3:5); I ask a question about her hope for the future; and after a while Fiona talks about how her father has committed 'the worst crime there is... he has had children and disowned them' (3:8).

On my part, themes are usually discovered by accident. Open questions allow them to shape our conversation. When I open an interview asking: 'What do you want to do?' respondents will often give a thematic answer sequenced like this: 'I want to do (this) because... past experience => significant discovery or breakthrough => passion => theory / conviction => commitment':

AW: So what does it [childcare] give back to you?

Deb: ... Oh, its excellent, I think it's good to know that you've, like at the end of the day but you might have taught them something or they're better at this, even if you teach them to do up their shoe laces (yep) it's really good (yep) ...

AW: You like to teach them er the skills?

Deb: Uh huh, and when I was little I um had trouble with school (yep) and Mum and dad picked me a tutor and she taught me heaps and now I'm really good at school, so I'd like to be able to do the same back (yeah) because it's a good feeling, its horrible when you're sitting there and you don't know anything, but when you get up there and you know heaps ... yeah I did I learned so much... Oh, when I was in primary school, lot's of little things mattered (uh huh), you know um, ...um, telling the time (yep) I had trouble with that (yep) then after a while I just got it real good, and that... (yep) like you can tell by all the reports just how much I'm improving in things (hmm) that's why I think it's good that, I feel little kids having trouble should have heaps of help (yeah) and I've got all the patience and that. (Debbie 106:169)

Themes may not be just individual but collectively owned. Family themes recur from generation to generation and are shown when issues, experiences, discoveries

or passions of parents are reflected in their kids' own stories. Noah's parents really struggled to get a first home for the family and he's suggesting that he might never leave it (Noah 2, 991:993). Max's parents had to scrimp and save 'just to get by' when he was younger. Now financial security is high on his own priority list:

Well, I don't know, probably about, I wouldn't mind like at 30 like be married and be a father, but before then I don't know, just get career up and running, get some money tucked away somewhere and (Yep, get the security.) Yeah. Have no bills. I don't - Mum and Dad had bills and bills scare me... By thirty I don't want any bills, have a family and then I will hopefully have a decent house by then. (Max 2, 1484:1503)

Cultural themes are also shared within community life (eg. 'settling' young men are all claiming work and job-security as high priorities). By virtue of cultural orientations and shared storytelling practices, some kids (eg. those 'settling') are drawing far more heavily on themes from group-history than idiosyncratic autobiographical ones.

Individuals' more idiosyncratic themes are very often centered around family issues and experiences, and developed as a more personal wrestle with meaning - rather than as a group exercise. These are some of the things that make individual interviews so diverse, so dynamic, and so intriguing over time. Over the 5 years it becomes clear that not only single interviews, but *whole lives* are being thematically organized. Themes form rich links between history and future, framing inquiries about future possibilities, clearly demarcating the 'no-go' zones:

Suzy: I hate drugs. They're ugly. Ugly ugly. I had a friend who died of a heroin overdose - that's one part of it and um, also Damien, my boyfriend was a drug user - I put a stop to that - 'cos I can't stand it - it makes me sick (physically sick?) Yep... (details of recent bad acid trip). It was bad. So I'm not going to have it anymore - ever.

AW: You learn from scares?

Suzy: Yep - that's a good thing that I learned. (Suzy 3:7)

Clearly storied themes multiply within individuals' lives. These legacies of the past become resources for negotiating and making sense of other encounters. They lead to the convictions, understandings and theories, with which the world and the future are negotiated. Un-storied incidents, on the other hand, create more chaos, permeating the ways in which life is interpreted without offering any new or clear direction. The role of the significant other is in rehearsal of stories - listening, embellishing, thickening, helping to make sense of thematic material. Without this external input, themes often remain cloudy (see chapter 8 for more on this).

- *Convictions as symbolic resources*

'I don't think its right that...' 'I always think you should...' In statements of conviction or principle, respondents' understandings about 'I' intersect with propositions and theories about how the world is and should be. Often, respondents explain or justify past actions and future plans with unsolicited expressions of their principles, values or convictions. Convictions differ greatly between respondents, based on personal lived experience, or on the experiences of 'us', the collective. They can be political, moral, or loyalty-based. They also may be very concrete (eg. 'I won't smoke dope any more') or quite abstracted (eg. 'I want to do something useful with my life.').

Statements of conviction are spoken with the moral weight of truth, rightness or 'wrongness', and often also an element of 'should'. By virtue of earlier practices of storying, analysis, theorizing, and abstraction, convictions also become accessible resources for new situations. They become resources for negotiation (steerage) within the social world: 'To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand.' (Taylor 1989:27). Orientation towards 'the good' (Taylor 1989), or towards the 'valued goal state' (Gergen and Gergen 1988) means direction for the journey.

- *Language as symbolic resources*

Language is not simply an instrument of communication. It also entails a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories, a differing capacity to decipher and manipulate complex ideas, systems, and structures (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The type of language being accessed by respondents mean vast differences in the ways that each is 'processing', and able to 'process' the world, as exemplified in these statements made in two different year nine and ten interviews:



AW: If you had all the money you needed... [w]hat in the world would be the thing that you would choose to do above any other?

Max: Umm. I don't know. I have never really thought about it. (Max 2, 1657:1664)

Contrast Nicolette:

AW: If you didn't have to worry about money or how to survive or what would be the thing in the world that you'd do or really want to do?

Nic: Ohh... Umm. There's so many different things though. Like there's hunger and forests and helping all these people but umm, we have to in the essay from, we read *Animal Farm*. Have you read that? (Yeah.) And I was thinking how horrible is to have people in power that could do stuff like that. And then also comes the other reason that you need people in power cause people need sort of like they, where people need to look up to other people, or they wouldn't know what to do. Cause like the character in the book, Boxer. He's a horse. He, probably could think for himself if he thought about it, but he was too naive to. And there's like, people like that in the world. They need to look up to people, but when you have people in power, it all goes to their head and so they think they can achieve everything and they do everything. And so you can't have it both ways and so it ends up, person in power. I don't like that, but I don't think I could change it cause you end up hurting other people... 'Cause you could put somebody else back into power, 'cause it's all gonna go to their head and the same things just gonna happen all over again. (Nicolette 2, 1540:1578)

Language provides a more or less complex system - allowing the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex material (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:73).

Capacity for analysis (in this case, the global and abstract issues of ethics, politics and power), and of imagination (eg. what I could do with my life) depends upon the kinds of language, and therefore concepts at hand.

There are gender issues here; on average female respondents seem to be much more fluent with language (as indicated by the typical volume of text in transcripts), more used to expressing themselves, but also more used to ordering their worlds in story, and doing this together.

Access to language is also class-based (Bernstein 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). All of the cultural practices explored in this chapter implicate language. Note again that although not all 'exploring' respondents are middle class, at any given stage during this research, *all of the middle class respondents* (except two who are talked about later in relation to crisis) *are 'exploring'*. Language is about understanding and engagement. It is about the classification of things perceived, and names what to do with them (Strauss 1977). Because of access to different language resources, these kids actually live in different universes of meaning.

As differently accessed 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), language becomes central to understanding the ways in which social differences are perpetuated. Respondents' different language 'resources-at-hand' have in fact amplified themselves within individual lives over the time of the study:

- Available language => shapes what respondents perceive => which in turn shapes what they make sense of => which in turn shapes what they perceive.
- To have the language to make sense of a different social setting => means potential increased engagement => and increased language for what went on => then means increased potential for engagement.

As time passes, both of these patterns are becoming more pronounced.

- *Orientations or preferences as symbolic resources*

Suzy is drooling over a \$120 book of Salvador Dali prints: 'I need more books before I can move out - I've only got 2 shelves full.' (Suzy 3:6). Respondents' stories are filled with expressions like these. Statements that look at face-value like whim and trivia (like 'why am I documenting these?') are actually very significant in the processes of social reproduction. Bourdieu (1984) captured the power and subtlety of this in his idea of 'taste', a combination of the minutiae that make up everyday life (entertainment, food, music, social manners, speech, reading matter etc.). Bourdieu

suggests that the minutiae of taste not only express class location, but serve to socially locate individuals. Although the word ‘taste’ sounds facile, it is in the small practices and preferences that we would tend to dismiss as unimportant, that relationships of power and privilege are constantly negotiated. Preferences are ‘cultural capital’ in the way that education is – privileged knowledges and practices that serve to locate individuals within their social milieux and power relationships, but in tiny, almost unnoticable ways.

In interviews, taste clearly shows up in definitions of ‘real work’ ‘good job’, and ‘bad job’, but more importantly than this - even the significance of work. The social milieu defines the importance of work. In Pete’s family, to work has a moral loading:

Mum: Well he [Pete’s Dad] talked to me about that tonight and he said: “I don’t mind what he does, but he doesn’t want to think that we’re going to sponsor him for having a year off.” and I said “I’m all for that”. That’s as it stands at the moment. (Pete and Mum, 2, 1178:1181)

Mum: That’s the choice we’re giving you Pete. If you don’t go to Uni, go and get a job. That’s about it. (all laughing) (Pete and Mum 2, 1535:1536)

Mum: ... But we don’t want you to have a year off, where we’re paying for you to sit on your bum and do nothing. (Pete and Mum 2, 1554:1555)

which is reflected in the way Pete approaches the idea of ‘slacking off’, himself:

No, I didn’t mean that! God. You’ve taken me the wrong way. (Pete and Mum 2, 1557:1558)

This contrasts with Saul’s family, where work is numbered among other legitimate options:

AW: Do you reckon your kids will get jobs?

Wendy: Nah not down ‘ere.

AW: Is it OK if they don't?

Wendy: Yeah, I'd say so. S'pecially if there's no jobs about. If there's no work there's not much choice. (Wendy, 1995:37)

This is echoed in Saul's own comments from grade 7, about it being OK to not have a job (Questionnaire 1995). Respondents show different orientations towards spare time, for example, weekends - whether they get 'harnessed' or 'relaxed into'. While Mel races the clock to fit in structured activities like school, work, and competition sport, Saul is busy passing his spare time (after work) on the beer run:

Thursdi' nights is up got to 'uonville, might grab a 6-pack or something  
Fridi' night go up, cruise around till 11 or 12 - sometimes 1 in the  
morning - grab a couple of videos, carton, go me mates place and sort of  
'bout 12 Sat'di, shoot down 'ome, shoot to Dover, come back up -  
sometimes we stay at Dover sat'di night - git 'ome 8 or sometimes 9  
Sundi night... (Saul 3:8).

Orientations and preferences also show up in other more subtle ways, from where to live, to what type of family unit is desirable, for example, whether or not it is a good idea for all of Sarah's children to have the same father.

Viewed in this context, almost every statement in a semi-focussed interview becomes significant data. All of these tiny grounded incidents, perceptions, and expressions form a kind of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) which has implications for life-chances.

### *Resources of symbol and meaning: the implications*

Issues of culture and meaning, like these, should never be overlooked as significant issues of resources. Each of the things mentioned above - different frames, schemata, stocks of knowledge, themes, convictions, language, orientations and preferences - are resources which differently equip these kids to negotiate and engage with the social world. Each is about a collection of the symbolic tools with which individuals make such differentiated choices. As Willis, (1979) suggested, it is only through the combination of the operation of creativity, will *and culture*, that

some social differences could ever be so successfully perpetuated in young people's lives and between generations.

Further, these 'symbolic' resources have similar implications to more 'practical' resources. When accessible and accessed, they become tools of creativity. They also provide protection by equipping individuals to make sense of, and find their way within the (often crazy) world that surrounds them.

Following Garfinkel (1967), contemporary authors have been writing about the issue of 'reflexivity' and social change. 'Reflexivity' is agency reflecting upon itself, and also upon its conditions of existence. It entails the capacity for autonomy and creativity (Giddens 1994a). Giddens and other authors (Beck 1992; Beck et al. 1994; Lash 1994) suggest that late modernity creates conditions of 'increased reflexivity', where individuals need to be increasingly mobile or open to change, and increasingly reflexive – that is 'reflexively mobilized'. Within a setting like this, 'symbolic resources' become far more important. They determine the extent to which individuals can be reflexive and reflexively mobilized. In effect, different access to information means inequality of 'reflexivity chances' (Lash 1994). This means there are different opportunities for the individual to reflect upon themselves and /or their conditions, and to act creatively in a changing world.

Within this conceptual framework and within these understandings of social change, symbolic resources like the ones discussed in this chapter become increasingly important.

### **Resources of habit and practice**

The most pervasive, powerful, but subtle differences between repeat-interviews are still to come. Significant chunks of transcript can best be differentiated by using 'verb' categories like: 'storytelling' or not; 'doing abstraction'; or 'doing a concrete'. This material again reinforces the idea that social differences (eg. class and gender) are not best understood as categories of people, but as differences in practice, 'in what they do with their relationships and their resources.' (Connell et al. 1982:33).

It is easy to overlook young people's habits or practices as being resources, but, as shown in respondents' interviews (like Suzy, earlier), they have become exactly that in day-to-day life. Some of the most significant differences in the ways that young people can negotiate with the world are not so much owned, accessed externally, or even thought, as *embodied in practice*. These dynamics are social more than psychological, and not inherent to individuals, but happen within the processes of social life.

This forms the basis of a critique of the (now popular) youth 'resilience' literature. The focus is on individuals' psychological survival skills or the ability to 'bounce back', particularly after crisis (see Rutter 1987; also Benard 1998). The task is to identify individual indicators of 'resilience' or 'protective factors' and instill them within young people. Although this has merits (seeking the specific ways in which young people can be empowered), the lists of indicators and factors involved in being 'resilient' (for example achievement orientation, self-esteem, sense of coherence, internal locus of control, adaptability to change, see Werner 1989) can be more significantly understood as *social practices*. These 'protective factors', rather than being the cognitive property of individuals, are usually socially shared dispositions, shaped within particular cultural contexts, within specific groups, relationships and histories. Like other psychological legacies surrounding 'youth', the 'resilience' framework allows researchers and practitioners to concentrate on what type of kids they are encountering or 'producing' without a framework of questioning what types of relationships, communities and societies surround them (and also what the young people in question might teach us about society or social change).

### *Engaging differently with transcripts*

In their later interviews respondents are asked: 'So what's changed since we last spoke?' 'How did it happen?' 'How did you get here?'. Their retrospective accounts differ greatly. Proud or hopeful stories of 'how I got there' / 'how I am getting there' contrast starkly with more muted accounts of 'it just happened', 'I don't know' or 'I don't want to talk about it'. The most striking contrasts are of respondents' most basic understandings of themselves as being responsible or as powerless in where they have ended up. Further, despite their different answers, it

seems as if *each is at least partly right*. The truth is complex, and although respondents are surrounded by different opportunities, *their own (cultural) habits and practices have also been differently resourcing each to negotiate their world* with varying degrees of creativity, clarity of meaning, power and protection.

An immediately apparent difference in practice is between those who are vocally 'making sense' and finding some kind of order in their transcripts, interviews and the surrounding communications, and those who continue to have it all wash over them.

Some (particularly 'exploring', and 'settling' women) relish the chance to ponder over their transcripts, to discuss them, and to re-read them: 'Gosh how could one person write so much about me! (Suzy, 3:7), or:

'Oh it was really good - 'cos I read all this stuff, and there was all this stuff there and it was just *me* and it was just Jodie [best friend], and I could really see [us] in there... I want to bring it out in another few years and have a giggle. (Ellen, 3:2)

These respondents are affectionate towards their earlier stories (and these written versions of them), and some are saying that they will keep their transcripts with their journals, photos or other records and treasures. Meanwhile others (especially 'settling' men), though happy to oblige in the exercise (perhaps amused / flattered / curious), say they do not really see the point: 'Nah - you take it - just one more bit of paper to lose.' (Brett, end of interview 3). Those 'wandering' are usually fully engaged and fascinated, but far less equipped to analyze or make use of the material by themselves: 'Play the tape again... play the tape again...' (Simon, after interview 3), or: 'You tell me how I've changed.' (Kylie 3:17). Those 'retreating' will only go there under sufferance: 'Oh God, this is so embarrassing.' (Sal, immediately before interview 3). She has the same reaction to the photos I bring her: 'Oh God, I look horrible'. Such different dealings with their own stories on paper also give clues about some very different dealings with their own stories in everyday life.

Respondents' responses to their transcripts probably has everything to do with the different resources that they bring to the encounter. To explore a story of your own circumstances when you know that you have few practical options may be

threatening, and to visit the same story with limited symbolic resources would be at best overwhelming. Responses seem to be linked to agency, and the power to do anything with or about the contents of the pages.

*Making 'strings of gems' or 'strings of nots'*

Over the time of the research, some respondents are showing evidence of being greatly enriched; as they speak, lived experiences are storied and strung together as understandings, theories or propositions, examples, identity definitions, technical knowledge, increased vocabularies, philosophical insights and political or moral convictions. These threads of historical interpretation are precious and could be likened to 'strings of gems'.

Increased understandings about the world like these mean increased ability to negotiate, as do increased understandings about themselves. A 'string of gems' involves cumulative wisdoms, cumulative engagements, and a growing sense of identity within this. Selves are being enlarged in action and in efficacy, and these individuals are often (but not always) finding the resources that they need in order to continue engaging further.

By way of contrast, other respondents in their later interviews are presenting with 'strings of nots':

Phoebe: I won't do that prob'ly (we are looking at transcripts). I'm not going to have any kids. I'm not doing any of that stuff prob'ly.

AW: You wouldn't go to uni and be an artist?

Phoebe: Nah!

AW: And live in Hobart?

Phoebe: Nah. (Phoebe 3:1)

(Later)

AW: What's changed since back then for you - like what do you look at on the transcript and say: 'Oh gee I've changed?'

Phoebe: Just I don't know really, there was a lot of stuff in the grade 8 one, that was really dumb (laugh).

AW: Really (yeah) like what?



Phoebe: I don't know, just all this stuff, like my rats and dog and that  
... [I was going on about them].

AW: And you don't go on about them any more?

Phoebe: Well one of my rats got a tumour and died. (Phoebe 3:2)

(Later)

AW: And how's your art?

Phoebe: (laughs) Gone down the drain.

AW: What do you mean?

Phoebe: I'm so crap compared to everyone else I know. I'm not doing  
art this year 'cos I'm too slow. (Phoebe 3:3)

The 'string of nots' is a litany of things lost. Lived experiences are sources of disappointment that are unstoried or hastily storied (as if unrehearsed or cobbled together without the aid of a company that can interpret, or highlight the gems with them - see chapter 8 for more on this). Rather than defining themselves into possibilities, these individuals seem to be primarily defining themselves out of them. In that form, the stories are impoverishing the storyteller.

Accompanying these 'strings of gems' and 'strings of nots' are respondents' different practices of 'storying the wins' and 'storying the losses'.

### *Storying the 'wins'*

'Wins' are the everyday successes. 'Storying the wins' can be a particularly powerful manoeuvre because it involves keeping a clear record of what works for future reference. Among those 'exploring' and 'settling', clear stories have framed individual day-to-day practices to the point where they can relatively easily recognise 'wins' as they happen.

Wins (potentially) build stocks of knowledge (how I / we did it, how we / I will do it). Along with knowledge comes new stories about identities: 'I think, I reckon I've got a pretty high percentage in getting there. (Yep) because I'm pretty determined to do good.' (Mel 2, 600:605); about competencies and abilities: 'I usually catch on to things... Catch on pretty quick.' (Mel 2, 614:619); and ultimately, they affirm agency and the ability to negotiate powerfully or to act purposefully in the world:

Then after a while I just got it real good, and that, because I was like um, knew that, I knew, I wasn't, I wasn't I was smart, but I just had to have someone to push me a little bit further, sorted it out and ended up helping - like you can tell by all the reports just how much I'm improving in things. (Debbie 2, 157:169).

Wins affirm trust, not just in the other social actors involved, but in self as competent operator and actor. Regarding his work future, Pete says:

Pete: I'm pretty relaxed about the whole situation.

AW: Yeah. where does the relaxedness come from?...

Pete: Dunno... The worst thing that, that could happen is I wouldn't matriculate, which is, won't happen because I'm pretty - (pause)

AW: You get good marks and - ?

Pete: Yeah. (Pete 2, 1033:1049)

These wins, and what is learned from them become part of the future plan, the basis for 'I can do' statements, a methodology for future action in the world:

Pete: Umm, sort of half way through the year, almost had, had really really almost straight 'A's in most of my subjects, half way through the year and all the work sort of built up and I thought: 'Oh bugger this, I'll just get, yeah Bs or so for the rest of the year'. But umm, yep get pretty good marks and that will do. (Pete 2, 1096:1100)

They also extend definitions of what's happening and relevant:

Umm, I did viticulture as a, what was it work experience in grade 10 and that was really good, I liked that it was working out doors... (Pete 2, 1232:1234)

Respondents' earlier stories about wins (for example those they told in earlier interviews) have been focusing their energies and engagements, facilitating further 'wins' later, for example:

- ⇒ from state-level netball player to paid coaching;
- ⇒ from mechanical hobbyist to paid repair jobs (home business);
- ⇒ from promising new sales employee to trainer of other employees.

In this way the stories of wins' that were evident in earlier interviews are multiplying within kids' lives. In their wins, respondents' stories are finding some 'resonance' (rewarding feedback) with other stories in the world around them. Their stories become clearer and more specific, in turn 'fine - tuning' or focussing their engagement in the world, leading to some more wins...

Equally significantly, though, the practice becomes a 'way of being' in the world. Those 'settling' and 'exploring' can story the wins on their own, with less help, on the fly, and in interviews. Meanwhile, those 'wandering' and 'retreating' (as shown in chapter 5) are not so much engaged in storying practices, but in surviving, getting by, and / or being with safe others. Again, this says as much about context as about kids' individual practices (see chapter 8). For these respondents, though, any wins are slipping past largely unstoried and unnoticed.

### *Storying the losses*

The experience of having done things, especially if deemed 'unsuccessful', is also potentially useful. Learnings can be very grounded:

'You can't ride a bike when you're pissed. (Saul 2, 31).

or quite abstract:

AW: So where in grade 8 [you say]: I'm going to live happily ever after...'

Kylie: I guess when you grow up you find out that things like that don't happen. (Kylie 3:15).

In either case, these learnings are serving as a guide to future social engagement and negotiations. Losses can lead to useful shifts in technical understanding and changes in practice:

Oh, I usually only drink on a Friday night and then I usually get like, in bed. (Saul 2, 32);

or more profound changes, like when Debbie's cousin killed himself with a shotgun:

That's my attitude, life is too short the serious... I've only just started being like this... because what has happened... and that sort of hit me it's like Oh Man! He was only 15, he's got his whole life ahead of him and that and then I just started changing... my attitude towards life, just like that (Debbie 2, 399:419).

However grounded or abstract, technical or profound, the significant move here is reflection, and the practice of putting language around what went wrong, and 'where to from here'. Other authors have written about these things, in more abstract language (eg. 'praxis' Freire 1973; eg. 'reflexivity' Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Beck et al. 1994). Ultimately, though, in other research and among this group, the practice of reflection and clear storying is proving to be empowering. Storying history clearly increases the ability of the individual to negotiate (efficacy in negotiations, and also direction for the journey) now and in to the future.

Among other respondents, though, losses are leading to few clues for future directions, with no insights for change. For those 'wandering' in particular, unstoried or partially storied losses or disappointments simply become part of the rolling chaos:

AW: So um - sounds like you made an earnest attempt to get this education thing going again this year?

Ben: Yeah that didn't work though.

AW: Yeah what tripped you up really?

Ben: I don't know - just not going to class I suppose. (Ben, 3:1)

or they fold inwards as self-blame, for example when Judith wants to reconcile with her family:

Judith: It's just like I don't see that it's ever going to happen. Like a lot of things that I've wanted, it just didn't come. So, I always do the opposite.

AW: You always do the opposite - so is it you? As in you blame you for the things that don't happen?

Judith: (nodding, speaks very quietly) Yep. Yeah I say I'm going to do this and instead I do something else that I wouldn't have done. (Judith 2:2).

Among this group, female respondents are more likely to claim 'self-blame' storylines, and are far more likely to take full responsibility for all that has gone wrong. There are gendered patterns in the ways in which setbacks are interpreted and understood. But rather than simply being personal failures, many of the disappointments are manifestations of broader social issues (see Mills 1959; also Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

Where earlier many were hopeful, some are now being 'cooled out'. As earlier stories about 'past, present, future and me' have failed to mesh with other stories in the world around them, some respondents are showing increasing alienation or disengagement:

I think maybe I don't believe in love any more because every time you love somebody they always go away. (Yeah?) So I think I've just given up on that too. (Kylie 2:14).

This kind of speech needs to be differentiated from the realism that simply comes from 'growing up', when with increased life-experience, old ideas are superseded by new ideas (see Strauss 1977:90-2). The common pattern amongst those 'wandering' is that earlier stories are not being transformed and enlarged by lived experience, rather, previously valued parts of them are being simply shaved off:

AW: You were a bit of a nature-lover - do you miss that?

Phoebe: Ah - I don't really - care any more. (Phoebe 3:4)

Here we can see a real ambivalence, even violence towards earlier transcripts and even earlier selves:

Phoebe: Thinking I was an idiot.

AW: Why thinking you were an idiot?

Phoebe: Oh - just stuff I said.

AW: So anything in particular?

Phoebe: This (laughs, rifles through transcript)... This (laughs, more rifling)... This. (Phoebe 3:1)

... Yeah I was just going on about nothing... (Phoebe 3:3)

Among those 'wandering', past plans, dreams, or fantasies are being trashed and fewer new ones are replacing them. So where others respondents are, in third interviews, bringing out their 'strings of gems', these individuals are coming equipped instead with 'strings of nots'.

Social relationships, histories and context are deeply implicated in the development and maintenance of these different social practices, and chapter 8 will explore these things further. The point here, though, is that different kids are being differently resourced by different habits and practices, and that, *as individuals' lived experience confirms their validity, the different habits are strengthening within lives and stories.*

### *Habits of clear storying*

So much of this discussion is about issues of storying. This is primarily because, whether clear or unclear, kids' stories are the conduits through which they access the resources of lived experience. Respondents' stories are making the resources of the past (eg. stocks of knowledge, themes and convictions) available to them in the present and the future (perhaps almost in the way that cultures have been doing for thousands of years) (Lévi-Strauss 1967; 1972; 1979). Storying, in fact, makes the resources of lived experience portable - thorough space and time.

During re-interviews, respondents of different cultural orientations display different practices for making coherence in their ongoing stories. Figure 6 shows how, as well as coherency and incoherency in narratives (making 'strings of gems' / 'strings of

notes’) a significant pattern in the data relates to practices of ‘abstraction’ and ‘concreteness’ whilst storying. The issue here is that respondents’ different practices of storying actually structure how other resources become available to them.

**Figure 6: Stories as conduits through which different resources are accessible**

Focus	Global	<b>Exploring</b> ‘strings of gems’: kids are accessing: more <i>abstract</i> theories, propositions, stories of identity, of wins and losses	<b>Wandering</b> ‘strings of notes’ chaos and fragments
	Local	<b>Settling</b> ‘strings of gems’: kids are accessing more <i>grounded</i> theories, stories of particular events, things and people	<b>Retreating</b> Don’t want to go there any such resources may be inaccessible
		Clear	Unclear
Stories of ‘past, present, future and me’			

*‘Doing abstraction’ or ‘doing a concrete’*

When respondents ‘do abstraction’ they are (explicitly or implicitly) grouping and comparing like cases. Sam is thinking about uni for next year and so I ask about the courses he wants to do and why:

Sam: ...Umm, the career opportunities is one. (Mmm hmm). There’s lots of career opportunities in both geology and ah ag. studies at the moment. (Sam 2, 1222:1232)

When respondents practice doing abstraction, this leads to rapidly expanding ways of engaging with the world. More things become ‘relevant’, and information searches are broader (eg. there are more ‘people like me’). Past experiences are more generalizable, more accessible, fitting in with more new ideas and exposures. This opens new opportunities for lateral, original or idiosyncratic connections with the

stories of others. As a prospective student, Sam asks about my uni career. I explain that for me, sociology was the most interesting:

Sam: Do you do anything like to do with like racial studies? Stuff like that?

AW: To do with what studies?

Sam: Like racism and stuff like that (Oh, yeah). Did you see that thing the other night? (which one?) Oh, the SBS, thing on SBS...

(Sam 2, 736:749)

His questions lead into a prolonged discussion about the Jane Elliott documentary 'Blue Eyed' (Verhaag and Elliott 1966), and his awakening to issues of racism in Australia.

While some (particularly those 'exploring') are filling their stories with abundant abstractions, others are not (particularly 'settling' males). 'Doing abstraction' sits in direct contrast to 'doing a concrete'. 'Doing a concrete' is grounded, incident-based, location-based, or object-based. So rather than aspiring to work in retail, John wants to work in Wally's shop. John's is a 'do-one and add-one' way of processing lived experience – slow, but very thorough. It is very male and very 'Valley' (ie. very 'settling') to do this. In their stories, specific past experiences (eg. places visited, people engaged with, tasks done) are extended to become specific (rather than general) future possibilities, eg: 'I Want to work at Gregman's Bodyworks 'cos I went there for work experience'. This orientation leads to a thoroughly grounded and comprehensive knowledge of specific subject matter (eg. Holden Gemini engines). Also (in its extreme), it means these respondents are only storying the familiar, expecting to engage with the familiar, and seeing the familiar as relevant.

Such a discussion about abstraction and concreteness echoes some of the writing of Bernstein from the 1950s-70s regarding 'elaborated' and 'restricted' codes (eg. see Bernstein 1977). He describes these codes as sets of meanings that are either restricted to a given context (ie. context-specific), or elaborated as principles that can be communicated and become useful beyond the given setting. Bernstein's thesis was that the elaborated codes also provide principles for change, for innovation, for control, and that education was likely to encourage these types of understandings in



young people. He also argued that through their socialization patterns, middle-class children had far greater access than working-class children to this type of code, and consequently that they could make use of the elaborated codes that their schools offered them much more readily.

Certain ways of storying lives and engaging with the world remain context-specific, whereas other practices are more adaptable to new situations. In the case of 'settling' young men 'doing a concrete', in the rapidly changing world at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, understandings and social practices that are bound to specific local situations may have quite savage implications for individuals' life-chances. Particularly in a town where local population numbers, work options, and other solutions are shrinking.

During interviews, respondents who 'do a concrete' highlight this point in other ways. In order for interview questions to be open, the language and topics are often quite abstract. While this 'opens up' the interviews for most, it 'closes down' the options for concrete thinkers, and confusion follows:

AW: So okay, tell us about your place at Geeveston.

Mark: Like what? Umm. The house?

Ani: Yeah? Yeah. And everything significant about that place.

Mark: Well. What do I start with? It's brick.

AW: Mmm hmm

Mark: Umm. (Mark 2, 65:76)

and deteriorating exchanges follow:

Mark: Umm.

AW: Where are the best memories?

Mark: Geeze.

AW: What.

Mark: What like? (Mark 2, 76:90)

In hindsight, transcripts reveal these conversations to be a kind of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) at the hands of a tertiary educated, suburban

female researcher. Power dynamics mean that rather than fostering the expression of cultural differences, transcripts like this one suggest an all-too-familiar kind of middle-class hegemony playing itself out. The 'other' becomes oppressed (or 'inadequate', or 'wrong'). This is not just a methodological point. These stories should also give some clues about 'settling' / 'retreating' kids' encounters with other agencies, especially in a changing world, where they are increasingly needing to engage in the unfamiliar, and to pitch their energies at the 'general' rather than the 'specific' (eg. going on to college, seeking work by areas of specialty, beyond 'the Valley'). These are also the young people who have preferred not to continue with education, or started and then stopped. What does year 11, outside the familiar world, demand of them?

*Doing 'I am' vs. doing 'I can do': 'exploring' and 'settling' kids talk about identity*

In interviews, depending upon cultural backdrop, kids will say 'this is how I did it', 'this is how we did it' and therefore 'this is who I am' / 'who we are' (typical of those 'exploring') or 'this is how you do it' (more typical of those 'settling'). Also, depending upon what is meaningful, these stories are framed in different ways. Demonstrating, by explication and example 'who I am' is a more female respondent practice:

Counsellor, I reckon... it's nice to know that you can help people and so I just help them out. And Emma [best friend] says... it might be easy for me cause I've gone through a lot with my parents breaking up and that 'cause she had the same with her parents. And so I could talk to her... Just a shoulder to cry on and... so she at least had someone to talk to about it. She said she thinks I should be a counsellor 'cause I'm a good listener. (Elizabeth 53:91)

and displaying competency to the listener is typically a male respondent practice:

AW: And why do you like 'mechanicing'?

Mark: Um, don't know, I reckon it's pretty easy when I first started. I thought it would be pretty hard but it was fairly easy. (Yep.) It's all simple stuff. Probably with the, with computer cars and that it

will be harder. But you are doing that at TAFE and that - at Tech,  
you learn all about that. (Mark 2, 481:487)

Looking over their own transcripts, some are able to give quick summations of what surprised them, what has changed, built into summaries (solicited or unsolicited) of how they have changed. Rebekah says that she sees more change than continuity. She brings a written list of changes to her third interview that takes about 20 minutes to elaborate. Some other interviews are also full of statements like: 'I'm the kind of person...'; 'I like...'; 'I hate / don't like ...'; 'I seem to...'; 'I always...'; 'I never...' and 'I'm different to how I was'. These are practices of 'reflexivity' (Garfinkel 1967; Giddens 1994a) of agency reflecting upon itself.

Practices of self-analysis are both products of history, and become resources for future negotiations. Abstract statements about 'I am / I do' are leading to concrete-proof-stories about 'I did / what happened' which in turn lead to more possibilities:

*I used to follow but now I'm not a follower any more I do what I want*  
I just get sick of everybody telling me what to do (laughs) - it just got to the stage where I was just doing things 'cos people wanted me to and even if I didn't want to do it and I think it prob'ly - it prob'ly had a lot to do with when Joeline [best friend] left - like we used to be like this (fingers crossed) together - and it's sort of like I stepped out on my own 'cos I didn't have a close friend like I used to have - any more - so I stepped out on my own, and now that I'm with all my other friends *I'm my own person...* (Sonia 3:11)

The act of storying in this way is actually an identity-building process: An identity definition (abstract) is borne out in an example or incident (concrete) which leads to more definitions (abstract) and is elaborated by more incidents... This would be why 'narrative' therapists like Michael White and David Epston (White and Epston 1990; Epston and White 1992; White 1995; White 2000) are also focussing on these practices in their work with young people in crisis. Moving forward, they explain, is heavily dependent upon the work of defining and linking self to real-world possibilities and directions. In this way respondents are 'theorizing' themselves, creating understandings upon which practice can be based. Possibilities are

increased and directions are refined. Some individuals are clearly very used to, and very adept at, doing this for themselves and for an audience:

Alyssa: ...it would be interesting to get out with people that, really out on my own, sort of and see what happens. (She is moving interstate)

AW: Yeah. Yeah. You're sort of doing it in a big way aren't you?

Alyssa: Yeah. (both laugh)

AW: You're getting right away from the security of the known... Scary?

Alyssa: Umm, yeah, I guess it is in a way. But, yeah, I'd like to live a bit scary sometimes. (How come?) I don't know. Things I do, crazy things... Umm. I like going like rock climbing and stuff like that. (Alyssa 2, 465:491)

The practice of analyzing self becomes both the producer and the produced, multiplying as we listen. In interviews, *some* practices of self-analysis are exercised by most respondents, but not to the same extent. Reactions to their own transcripts suggest that doing this kind of thing is not seen by all to be 'relevant' or 'core-business'. Others are doing something else, and the question 'what has changed?' yields quite different kinds of answers: 'Not a lot really - working - got a car - drinking.' (Dale, 3:1).

In particularly 'settling' male interviews, most of the time is spent exploring their growing interests and expertises, and 'can do' is a common theme for transcripts. Their litany of expertises, although differently framed, is *no less about identity* than the 'I am' statements that others are making. Identity is anchored within situation, within what 'I can do'. Other authors (Connell 1995; Connell 2000; White 1997b) have pointed to the links between men's roles and men's bodies in a gendered world – that 'physicality' plays a significant role in male experience and structuring male practice and identity.

Identity, for these young men is also firmly anchored to the settings of these stories, the concrete manifestations of being and doing, within the physicality of it all, while at the same time the identity stories of others have proved to be far more portable.

This has big implications and impacts within the kinds of changes that these kids have been going through, for example finishing year 10, continuing education, looking for work, and a lengthening period of dependence. There are related and compounding implications from growing up with the sequence of male 'status passage' (see Strauss 1977) being seriously disrupted in rural communities, with traditional jobs disappearing, and with traditional cultural expertises losing relevance (see chapters 2 and 3).

### *'Doing self-talk'*

In the way that respondents tell stories of how things have happened, some have been 'talking themselves through' situations and settings, almost like an external coach or mentor:

Near the start of the year I started realizing: 'Hey this not bad, I can do this' and so I started doing it an now I've gone from a C at level 2 up to Bs in level 3. Umm. (Elizabeth 2, 1001:1003)

Yep. I think so. Like I saw how she got the fairly high TE score and thought. I thought at the start of college: 'I'm gonna get that or I'm gonna get better than that, just cause I want to beat her'. (Pete 2, 1371:1377)

This habit, reported by many who are 'settling' and 'exploring' is clearly a powerful tool - and usually invoked when they are extending themselves or resisting, 'going against the flow'. Again, it means that the individual is able to draw upon resources (preferences, themes, stories and particularly convictions) from outside their immediate social situation. This practice exemplifies a 'struggle for subjectivity' (McDonald 1999), the challenge for individuals to be able to be the actors of their own history, at a given moment to stand a little apart from the conflicting logics and flows of activity that surround them.

Because I went to Mount Wellington I had to walk up the mountain and I was whingeing all the way and really annoying everybody. But I was walking, I was kept walking: 'If I just keep walking fast, I'll get there, It'll be over.' And on the way back I beat everyone. And like I'm usually

the one lagging behind, so I really shocked myself. (Elizabeth 2, 1825:1832)

I was like: 'Oh, people a going to think I'm silly.' but then I thought: 'No, its excellent.' I learned heaps. (Yeah?) Yeah I did I learned so much. (Debbie 2, 138:140)

Like Sonia being a conscientious student and Suzy warring against drugs, interviews suggest that respondents' abilities to go 'against the flow' of the activity that surrounds them, rely heavily upon this practice, this resource (and also on what tools, convictions, stories, schemes, themes, and language they can draw upon in the process).

Ahh, I want to do, I want to fit as much as I can into my life, like I don't want to look back and say: 'Ah, I could have done something in those couple of years, where I've sat around and did nothing.' (Pete 2, 2123:2138)

### *Engaging in others' stories*

Individuals' lives are encircled by the stories of other people. Often these stories will hold valuable clues for young people's own project of making a life. However (as discussed in other chapters) each is accessing and making use of the stories in the world around them very differently. Compare Elizabeth's analysis of *Animal Farm*'s (Orwell 1950) power dynamics and politics from earlier this chapter, and Sam's discussion of racism, to Noah's lack of interest in global current affairs:

Noah: Ah, don't really like the news though.

AW: How come?

Noah: Oh, I just reckon it's boring.

AW: Yep?

Noah: S'pose it is for, people like me. Young ones. (Noah 2, 1256:1264)

Interest depends upon what is seen as relevant. The binary schemes mentioned earlier (eg. people like me / not like me) work like an information filter, defining 'relevance'. 'Young ones' (people like me) are interested in other things.

Engagement can lead to vicarious learning, and a bigger pool of 'relevance' is a bigger pool to learn from. Because of this, binary definitions (relevant / not relevant, or like me/not like me) are operating exponentially. As the scheme of 'people like us' expands, more things become relevant, and 'people like us' grows again. This has implications across the global / local divide - and particularly for individuals who have lived in 'The Valley' all their lives.

This pattern also relates to the idea of respondents having 'thick' stories - well rehearsed, rich descriptions, constantly revised and reconstructed with people who care - or 'thin' stories about the world they live in, and about themselves. In day to day life, thick stories make more connections with other stories, and with new possibilities. Again, this is exponential - more connections and new possibilities mean thicker stories.

As well as differences in *whose stories they will engage with*, respondents show differences in the *ways that they engage* with others' stories. Their practices range from very active engagement, through interested spectator, to disinterested co-existence on the same planet. Another spectrum ranges from those engaged in more critical readings of others' stories to unfiltered absorption. In interviews, respondents vary from being 'consumer-and-re-teller' of 'given' stories, to astute critic and 're-storyer'; accepting the given story or actively interrogating the data. This is dependent upon the kinds of resources that they are able to access outside the given story (eg. convictions, theories, et. al. all function as 'crap detectors').

### *Implications of habit and practice*

The practices listed above are prominent examples only, (for more examples, see Appendix C). Particularly those practices pertaining to local life have received insufficient explanation because of my own 'outsider' limiting frames and resources for understanding them. The point, though, is that *habits and practices are cultural legacies that shape possibilities*.

Resources of any kind mean power in negotiations. As the examples above have shown, this is also pertinent to understanding resources of habit and practice. Like *all resources* that we have covered, resources of habit and practice firstly: multiplying themselves (over time, as above) within group and individual lives, in practice; secondly, offer possibilities of creativity (about ways of engaging, negotiating); and thirdly, offer a layer of protection (eg. accessing resources external to the situation; some degree of analytical separation from what happens around them; accessing tools for 'crap-detection'). Some habits and practices leave kids able to be far more pro-active and flexible in the process of making a life.

### **Interwoven layers of resource**

People's ability to activate resources is a central part of agency (White and Wyn 1998). The findings discussed above suggest that agency involves being able to access and to activate resources at many levels - particularly practical, symbolic and habitual.

Respondents' stories have already demonstrated how access to particular resources (eg. language, themes, habits of storying) becomes multiplied within their lives over time. These patterns are made more complex as layers of habits and available symbols are overlaid - they multiply with and compound each other in practice. So, for example, respondents' habits of storying the possibilities for themselves are greatly enriched by a large repertoire of articulated passions or themes. Habits of critical analysis of others' stories - or culturally shared story-lines - are made all the more powerful by rich vocabularies (eg. frames, schema, language) of symbols with which to do that.

The relationships of all of these factors within the history of a social group - shared practices, habits, and symbols - Bourdieu calls 'habitus': 'history turned into nature' (1977:78), and: '... a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions any moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions...'. (Bourdieu 1977:82-3). He sees habitus as both 'structured structures' and 'structuring structures' (1977:72), and as being central to understanding the processes of cultural reproduction of inequalities.



All of this also points to the interwoven-ness – rather than the opposition of issues of agency and structure. Social structures, rather than obscuring individual and group action, are intimately involved in the production of that action, and are productions of same (Giddens 1979).

At a more grounded level, though, we could say that kids who can access certain understandings and ways of doing things, are also able to access certain practical opportunities, and that engaging in these in turn will offer access to certain other understandings and practices (and so on).

It is important here to look at how tangible (practical) resources relate to the less tangible (cultural and symbolic) resources. This is not the place to enter classic sociological debates: ‘subjectivism’ versus ‘objectivism’ (Bourdieu 1977); ‘cultural autonomy’ versus ‘economic determinism’ (see Williams 1981b). Note, though, that for the respondents in this study, there is a clear relationship between physical conditions and cultural practice, between being able to access practical resources, and patterns of accessing resources of symbol and habit. Over the time of this study, the causal relationships seem to be going both ways.

Some examples may be useful here. Access to practical resources, for example, geographical places, institutional systems and social networks beyond ‘The Valley’ are allowing respondents to have dreams and habits (symbols and practice) that encompass these broader worlds. At the same time, understandings about the meaning of life, and habits of storying futures, are allowing kids to access very different practical resources to these ends.

Williams (1981b:189) points to ‘the degree of closeness... between the conditions of most practices and a deeply organized form of social relation’. At a grounded level, this is exemplified as respondents’ social practices are a reflection of where they have come from, and they also play a large part in where they will be able to go. Being engaged in the world always involves creativity. Those who are being most oppressed by their situations need to be the most creative with challenges - and are often facing them with far smaller resource bases and with very limited repertoires of possibility.

Within the context of social change, and as we have seen in The Valley, at this time all are being stretched (at least a little) beyond what they know, but some will be able to be far more creative with the constraints and opportunities that face them:

The more the demand to 'make one's own life' becomes acute, the more material poverty becomes a double discrimination. Not only is there a lack of access to material rewards, the capacities for autonomy enjoyed by others may become crushed. (Giddens 1994b:188)

Here we return to the 'weave' of the different resources. The effects of this 'weave' compound within communities, within families, within trajectories. Cumulatively, available resources manifest as different choices and chances, tools for creativity and layers of protection. This leads to spiralling patterns, or exponential patterns within individual lives: greater access => use => greater access. Put bluntly, the 'haves' usually continue to get more, and 'have nots' mostly still have not. This is the social reproduction of life-chances. Other research with young people (eg. Banks et al. 1992) shows how the 'haves' in fact 'have' on many fronts (political participation, stable relationships, high quality of life, education, high status of jobs) and others do not. In a rude twist of history, though, as the local and wider world changes around Geeveston, there are also some 'haves' who increasingly 'have not'.

Several different analogies suit this picture: available resources are woven together like an elegant fabric, a safety net, or like gridded-up bars (ie. being trapped *or* excluded).

Understanding these issues of 'resources-at-hand' is central to understanding youth agency. Each of these things manifests in the individual trajectories of respondents, in the seemingly insignificant comments in interviews, in their negotiations to date, and in their engagement or lack of meaningful engagement in the situations in which they find themselves.

## **Beyond resources, to resource flows**

This chapter has looked more closely at the nature and significance of the different ‘resources-at-hand’ kids are working with as they make a life. Respondents’ stories showed how the creative work of idiosyncratically ‘making a life’ and making sense of their own lives (even to aspire, to story, to negotiate and to engage) is constrained and shaped by the availability of this practical, symbolic and cultural raw material. Practical, symbolic and other cultural resources weave together, as understandings and practical infrastructure, as goals and the means to attaining them, as dreams and the chance to make them into realities.

Kids and their resources have been a little de-contextualized from their relationships in this analysis. The truth is, though, that these different resources only ever flow within the context of social life. This is where the next chapter will focus.

## 8. Resource flows

The previous chapter showed how the resources that young people access are of very different types. However, respondents' stories suggest that their resources become available to them in very similar ways. That is, *different resources have similar patterns of 'flow' within their lives*. These 'flows' are the focus of this chapter. They are implicated in the ongoing patterns within individuals' lives and stories, and also within the dramatic changes.

Even though young people may not have very sophisticated accounts of economies and their place in macro-social systems, we cannot understand youth agency without first hearing their stories about the resources, the sources, and the resource flows that shape their negotiations. These *insider accounts are actually significant reports about social structure and process* that we cannot afford to ignore.

A *superficial reading* of respondents' insider-stories would surmise that young people make changes 'because they choose to', and that *this is all they can tell us*. We need to *read their stories more carefully* than this, and to *expect to engage multiple levels of analysis*. Respondents' stories also *offer invitations to look deeper*, for the tales of social structure and process within them. These are expert eye-witnesses. As well as telling about their choices, *respondents' stories give rich evidence about the social processes and the different contexts* that shape their own negotiations. By listening well, *we can hear and tell some much 'thicker' stories* about youth agency.

Based upon respondents' stories in this study, a case can be made that patterns of continuity and change (predictability and surprise, the social reproduction of inequalities or the transcendence of harsh conditions) within young people' lives, are all about issues of 'resource flows'. That is:

- firstly, the patterns by which these kids' stories and circumstances are reproduced year-after-year or even over generations are to do with (specific principles about) 'resource flows';

- and secondly, within occurrences of subtle or dramatic change in respondents' lives, those same principles of 'resource flows' are also centrally implicated.

The rest of this chapter looks at what respondent stories explain: how they are getting access to their resources (and the patterns in their stories); the different kinds and sources of these 'flows' (particularly through families, but also peers, school, community, mass media); how young people themselves are also heavily implicated in these dynamics; and the implications of all of these things for ongoing patterns and changes in their lives.

### **How these kids are getting access to resources**

One day, when I was telling Kurt's Mum about my research, she shared this story with pride: 'We weren't at all sure that Kurt was going to be alright - he was smart with an attitude problem.' (I had discovered the 'sharp end' of his tongue when I asked him for an interview in 1995). Kurt had 'nothing lined up' when he left grade 10. One Saturday, a few weeks after he left school, a friend of Dad's arrives and mentions an apprenticeship that his mate is looking to fill. 'Kurt!': Mum says. 'That's what I was thinking'. When fronted with the idea, Kurt has other plans to do a bit of casual carpet-laying with a mate. Mum and the friend explain the value of this compared to the other job. Then he is both keen and reluctant: 'I'll go Monday'. Mum says: 'Go now, you'll miss it'. Dad's friend picks up the car keys: 'Come with me and we'll go now'. Kurt got the job.

Kurt's relationships link him to resources, and not simply the resource of the job. There are *several other layers of resourcing going on here*. A 'trusted other' brings an idea. The idea is judged as one worth engaging with because certain *meanings* (ie. about the 'relevance' of this apprenticeship for Kurt) are effectively communicated. The same other (coach) brings Kurt an (implicit or explicit) definition of himself: 'You could do this'. Coach gets him there - providing a lift or *practical* infrastructure. Coach also offers Kurt safety - company into the unknown world. Coach brings modes of *practice*: 'we'll go now' and propels him, time-wise (there is no time for fear to grow), as Mum later says:

Gee they need that push though - even if I said we'll do it and gone to get my car keys, by the time I got back he would have changed his mind.  
(fieldnotes, April 1999)

In this story, Kurt is able to access new resources. The 'resource flows' set out a pattern which is replicated in other stories. Firstly, what happened is *social, relational, and contextual*, not simply about Kurt and his own choices or mindset or what he knows. Secondly, the flow of resources happens in the context of specifically, at least one '*trust relationship*'. Without the coach, even if Kurt needed a job and knew about the job, he simply would not have gone. Thirdly, there are *enough* layers of new resources here to make the difference (a kind of critical mass). Fourth, the resources become 'useful' because they provide him with new input and with *ways ahead*. Fifth and finally, once Kurt has *been there* with his 'trusted other', *he can go there* by himself, *again*. He does. When Mum told me the story, Kurt was a 4<sup>th</sup> year apprentice fitter and turner.

Sonia's story of how she came to be a trainee secretary has some similar elements: She likes and trusts her Aunt; Aunt offers Sonia new definitions of herself, concrete opportunity, safety, exposure, and practice:

She's worked there, I guess that's basically why I really want to.  
Because she always, you know, she's always said to me: You should do that sort of thing, because *I think it's you*'. (Sonia 2, 147:153)

Like I used to go up to work with her all the time and [she'd] show me what she did and all this sort of stuff. (Sonia 3:3)

When respondents answer questions about what has happened and how it happened, their stories are all quite unique. However, the stories hold some common plot-lines and reveal some very similar social processes.

### *Patterns in the stories*

These patterns reflect not just how kids get jobs, but how respondents are accessing resources for their own negotiations, resources to make a life.

Interview data is full of stories of *practical resources* becoming available through trusted others. Mark gets a loan to buy his car from Dad. Dale got his home-business and earliest tools through working alongside his Pop. Mel can only compete in elite sports because her parents will faithfully drive her (and cheer). Chapter 5 provides a case study of post-year-10 practical options becoming available through trusted others.

Likewise, *resources of symbol and meaning* are also becoming available through trusted others. It is within the context of relationship, of 'intersubjectivity' or shared understandings, (Berger and Luckmann 1967) that new things become meaningful and relevant. Within his relationship with Dad, uncles, and brothers, Noah learns the intricacies of Holden engines. Within her relationship with her sports-coach Mel learns to think about herself as a potential sports-coach. Within the safety of her relationship and new home with John, Beth learns a language with which she can speak about her abusive past, and also her possible futures.

One prevailing figure in many of these stories is the 'mentor' or coach. Mentors translate or re-translate reality, bringing new stories, languages and meanings. Significant characteristics of the relationships include trust, mutual respect, and two-way-flows of communication. The most effective mentors are those who know richly the respondents' own universe of meaning. That is, they are fluent in the young person's stories, conceptual schemes, themes, theories, passions and convictions, in their languages of words and other symbols. The relationships therefore involve mutual opportunities for translating the world, and pointing out why new things could be possible or 'relevant'.

One-to-one conversation is a significant forum for making meaning. The telling and re-telling of stories adds robust-ness; 'thickening' individuals' 'thin' stories about themselves or the world in which they live. (See also Michael White's work on 'narrative' therapy: White and Epston 1990; Epston and White 1992; White 2000, re the role of the other in thickening individuals' 'thin' stories). Storying is significant because it is about the individual's ongoing relationships with themselves (see chapter 4), with the world (see chapter 6), and it also provides a way to access resources from other times and places (see chapter 7).

Not co-incidentally, respondents who, in interviews, do not share any stories of passionate engagement with the world, are also the ones who do not share any stories about coaches or mentors.

Another very powerful figure in some respondents' stories is 'the prophet'. (There is some overlap with the mentor but the 'prophet' can be a trusted *distant* figure.) Strauss (1977) introduces the 'prophet' as a trusted other who both points to new directions and re-interprets the path (eg. religious or political leader, teacher, artist). The dynamic here is not just about the availability of new symbols, but about the *radical re-arrangement of symbols already familiar and in-use*, and the dramatic transformations of understandings and stories that can follow this move. The 'prophet' appears within respondents' stories occasionally, as teacher, as adult friend, as TV program, even as novelist.

*Resources of habit and practice* are also only becoming available through trusted others. This flow of resources can be as much 'osmotic' as deliberate. As Elizabeth explains:

I've grown up with [Dad]. He hasn't really taught us, but you just watch him and do the same things he does. (Elizabeth 1:91)

Habits are caught as much as taught. Identification is of paramount importance - 'people like me', 'we', and 'us' - become generalized forms of the 'trusted other'. Otherwise, social practices are simply things that 'other people' are doing, (eg. *other* people go to university) and they have little or no impact.

*Different kids, different stories, different resources, same flows*

Although the resources that respondents are using to make a life are very different, they have similar ways of flowing around. Drawn from every perceived story about 'resource flows' in the interviews, here are the common patterns of how new resources are becoming available to respondents:



1. Resource flows are social processes, dynamic and contextually enmeshed. Of particular interest are the relational dynamics of both *being resourced* and *engaging with resources*.
2. A *trust relationship* is always involved. This can be with persons, groups, institution or systems;
3. At any given moment, judgements about whether there is *enough* shift in resources - to make a difference for the individual concerned - are impossible to make from the outside. This depends upon how respondents engage with new resources / loss of resources, but also upon other concurrent flows of resources.
4. If new resources are going to be useful, there needs to be access to the 'means' as well as the 'ends'.
5. '*Been there, can go there again*'. More precisely, been there with trusted other, can go there again.

Among this respondent group, these seem to be the simple principles behind why social patterns endure within stories, lives and families. But they are also the processes by which changes in respondents' lives are happening. More evidence for these claims will be explored soon, but first, some definitions are needed.

### *Trust relationships*

'Trust relationships' hypothetically involve a spectrum: at most, putting life in someone else's hands; while at the minimal end of the scale, a 'trust relationship' means an expectation of (bottom line) safety, that the encounter will ultimately be more about gain rather than about damage. The 'trust relationships' in question here are mostly about mid-to-low end on the spectrum; they are about having *enough* history (or vicarious history) of safe encounters with the 'other' to warrant engaging this time (eg. going to school today, or being open with parents). The higher the 'ask', the bigger the 'stock of trust' needs to be.

Nor does mistrust necessarily infer the expectation of being annihilated by the 'other'. The same kind of spectrum applies. Often, trust relationships are simply not present or substantial *enough* to facilitate the particular transactions in question (eg. Suzy going to school, Kurt alone visiting the fitter-and-turner who wants an apprentice).

*'Been there, can go there again'*

Once individuals have been somewhere they can think to go there again. Geography is both a good example and metaphor for this pattern. In chapter 4, *some* respondents are familiar with parts of the social world outside The Valley, because they have lived or been there with their families. When respondents story their futures, only *these* kids can plan their ways back to these same places (specific) or to outside The Valley (general).

Places that individuals have *been exposed to and engaged* with before can be visited again. Respondents are functioning with their symbolic resources and habits in much the same way. Ideas, definitions, themes, theories, language, and practices introduced by trusted others, and engaged with by the respondent, are resources available to be visited again. *Exposure plus engagement* in any kind of resources is leading to an *increased repertoire of possibilities for present and future negotiations*.

A play on words could be illuminating: Resources are re-sources: their use involves re-visiting, re-membering, re-applying or re-turning to the things that trusted sources or allies have already made available. Again, here is a word borrowed from writers about 'narrative therapy'. 'Re-membering' (Michael White 2000) is about invoking the company of those who were teachers of meaningful ideas (like Pete's mum, grandmother, and father in the first story in this chapter).

An extension of 'been there' is 'we've been there' (a kind of vicarious storying). When someone, a 'trusted other', part of 'we', or 'one of us' is already 'there', respondents will often think to join them:

I'd like to go to Queensland. I haven't been there, and I'd love to go there because I body board, that's my hobby... well if I like it I'd probably move up there, I've got family everywhere. (Debbie 2, 284:307)

P'robly go to New South Wales or something like that. Got relatives there so, easy. (Brett 2:3)

Young people who have not been before will think to go there because:

*...not like I'd be lost up there* [laughs] ... My Nan and Pop live in Queensland... So I could go up and live with them and look after them and that, pretty good, or I could live with Dad or I could live with my Aunties there... (Debbie 2, 284:307)

I've got aunties and uncles, I've got about half a dozen uncles up there somewhere. (Brett, 2:4)

Practical resources, ideas, or habits of trusted others are also being borrowed and tried on for size:

AW: So who got you inspired with guns?

Mark: Um, don't know, don't even know why I started working 'em. Um... think it was the fella I used to sit next to in grade six. Used to like guns, just always look at books. (Mark 2, 271:278)

'We've been there' also works as a bridge to other projects or commitments:

AW: Have you been doing the football since you were a little tacker?

Todd: Since about 1988.

AW: Oh. And what, what got you into it?

Todd: Oh. I went to football with me brothers one day. And then I just, and then I just liked it. (Todd 2, 89:101)

The extension of 'I have been there' to 'we have been there' (and still lived) is one of the things that now gets some of Geeveston's young people up to college:

Elizabeth: I hate going up to grade 10 like, cause this year flew by so if next year flies by, I'm gonna be in college. Yep, scary.

AW: You feel not ready for college?

Elizabeth: Noo, well, my sister seems to have, like *she's um met really nice friends and that. So that bit's all right*, but it's just the part of having to go up to town... (Elizabeth 2, 322:334)

Those who have been there often become ‘translators’ of information about the things to come:

If I have to do extra hours or tutoring or whatever, I’ll do it, just as long as I get up to level three... like [friend who finished college] said, they help you out up there. They’ll help me, so that’s good. (Max 2, 941:968)

And they make it safer for others to follow. Engagement with places, peoples, situations and social others is transferable within groups, within ‘us’. Likewise, so is mistrust.

### *Habits of trust and mistrust*

Trust reflects a history of safe encounters or vicarious safe encounters. In contrast to this, Suzy has learned after 17 years that it is simply too costly to engage with her father:

... I didn’t used to think I could go without it - but I definitely can - I’m not missing much that’s the way I see it. (Suzy 3:9)

This stems from a history of betrayal of trust:

And I’m growing to hate him more and more ‘cos he’s done that to me - like he’s - he made the choice - he didn’t have to choose at all - drove me out. (Suzy 3:5)

and from repeatedly being hurt in the encounters:

Recently I have tried to have contact with him - rang him up every month or so like when I was at work I’d ring up. But he doesn’t do the same. And I saw him the other day in Geeveston - went over to talk to him, he was sitting in his car and he had nothing to say to me - besides like: ‘How are you’. You know. And like I was so offended. (Suzy 3:5)

There is an ongoing wrestle between what 'is' and what 'should be':

... but you know a few months ago I - just thought I'll wipe him out of my life, I can do without it. 'Cos I thought before, you know, I need a father 'cos, you know, but I've realise that I don't, it's not sort of going to make a difference. I love me Dad though, I'm a real Daddy's girl, my brother's a Mummy's boy and I'm a Daddy's girl but I can't have that. So. (Suzy 3:5)

and the decision to finally disengage also involves loss:

AW: Is it kind of like you still love your father but it's just not worth the effort?

Suzy: Yeah - yeah... I don't think I can - I don't want to go through all of that emotional crap any more - like I've stopped letting it mess with my head sort of thing - like I don't need it. (3:9)

Suzy is being far more articulate about this process than most. She is also talking about a very significant other. In the case of less significant others, or relationships where the 'stakes' are not so high, respondents' choices not to engage can be far less aware or agonized - they seem to be just as much evolving in day-to-day practice according to habits, and to paths of 'least resistance':

I haven't been up [to see Dad] for a while 'cause I couldn't be bothered ringing him up. (Ben 2, 94:95)

Habits of trust or mistrust can be *very specific* (as above), or can become more *generalized*:

Kylie: But I don't trust anybody.

AW: Do you trust *you*?

Kylie: No. (Kylie 3, 13)

When I call her in 1999, Jenny (a respondent's mother) gives me an unexpected serve:

What is it you want? Why do you keep ringing us? Why do you want to talk to him about choices? Look, he *had* no choice! (Jenny 1999, 1)

Jenny is like a mother lion protecting her young from a predator. Later, when we have (re?)established some safety and mutual understandings, she explains that in order to 'hold it all together' she has been: 'getting money that I shouldn't have been from Social Security', and that my call had got her scared. Her lived experience at this moment is about being under scrutiny. By virtue of my timing, and by association, I had become one more part of that unwanted surveillance.

Practices reflect both individual history and group history. Lived experience is reified and passed on as stock-of-knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Clearly, this includes historically based understandings about who is trustworthy (or not) and why. This is evident when parents do or do not trust me (the stranger who is asking to interview their kid) upon first contact. Implicit messages include: 'Poor dear, how can we help you with your project'; versus: 'What do you want? Please don't hurt us' or: 'You hurt my kid and I'll rip your arms off.'. Reactions are clearly delineated along the lines of class and global / local culture. As 'The Stranger' asking questions I represent different things to different cultural groups (ie. the student with an interesting project or the potential city bureaucrat who might hurt us).

Among respondents, habits of trust are being extended differently to *individuals*, but also to other *groups* and to *institutions and systems* according to group histories. These are not usually made explicit or named, but are part of cultural orientations, part of people's ways of being and functioning in the world. The Eldridges are of self-sufficient working-class stock. After much distress, their solution to their kids' unemployment is to re-mortgage the house, start a business and employ the kids.

Individual and group habits reflect both basic assumptions and repeatedly learned lessons about allies and alliances.

## **The different sources of resource flows**

In interviews, respondents inadvertently list their resources (like Suzy did early last chapter). Likewise, resource *flows* are often spontaneously flagged by statements about what x ‘did’, ‘always says’, or ‘does’. The types of ‘flow’ are many: *taught* me, showed me, *took* me, *explained* to me, *told* me, even *yelled at* me, but they are all about ‘been there, can go there again’ (physically, symbolically or in practice).

Sometimes spontaneously and usually when asked, respondents can name sources of their practical tools, understandings, and practice. The most frequently cited sources are families, friends, teachers, community members, and on occasion, mass media. It is worth briefly exploring the role of each in resource flows.

### *Families: for history and context*

One of the most significant characteristics of families is that they have the potential to provide focussed inter-generational forums for kids to make their lives. Many respondents are drawing richly upon the resources that these trust relationships bring. Families are implicated in the ways in which kids are physically being resourced and also in their practices (ie. ‘cultural capital’). The most interesting (yet untold) stories, though, are about flows of the symbolic, and things of ‘meaning’.

I am witness to intense negotiations between Pete and his parents about whether to go to university next year or take a break from study. The errors and collective wisdoms of previous generations become involved in the drama being played out in Pete’s dining room. As Pete sits down to work out what to do, Mum has this to say:

Mum (to Pete and me): I had suggestions saying you should do this, but that’s your choice and that’s how I always think it should be. You can suggest but you can’t make - it’s not fair. (Yeah.) And in the long term, I don’t want him to be 45 years old and saying: ‘It was me mother’s fault. She made me do that.’ (Pete and Mum 2, 1612:1620)

It seems that this is an issue that resonates within family history:

- Pete: Thinking that I'll go to Uni.
- Mum: Mmm. I'm certainly not going to push that, I mean I'm, we *have this thing in our house* that John [Dad] always says that. His mother went out and got him a job, you know he was at college and he'd been there for a week and his mother came home and said: 'Oh, I've got an apprenticeship for you' and he said: 'I didn't even want to do it' so he always has this thing about: 'Ooh, I'm never going to do that to my kids.'
- Pete: Bloody mother. (All laugh.) (Pete and Mum 2, 1578:1588)

That 'we have this thing in our house' highlights a 'thematic' issue - the Straatsmas have been here before. In fact, as Pete does his thinking out loud and Mum adds her wisdom, a whole host of other witnesses and their contributions are invoked into the conversation:

- Mum: ... But he still blames his mum for it, after all these years, he still sees that as her fault. And um -
- AW: Gee, it stays with you, doesn't it?
- Mum: It does. (Pete and Mum 2, 1559:1608)

The learnings and resources that Pete can draw upon at this point are not just his own, not just his Mum's, here in the room with him, but his Dad's and Grandmother's as well. In this story, learning is a family experience, and involves the cumulative and abstracted wisdom gleaned over the last 45 years. Before Pete makes his decision, guidance comes from many sources. After the fact, his own action will be 'thickly' storied by many voices, in languages of shared understandings.

In family relationships where conversation is fluent, where ideas and projects are shared, where stories are told and retold, rehearsed, embellished and 'thickened' in the context of the insights of others, learning is a group exercise and it is abundant. However, not all respondents are able to draw on these kinds of relationships:

The only time my mum talks to me is when she's crabby with my brother. (Kylie 3:10-11)



For kids 'going solo', who do not have inter-generational forums in which to safely do this, both finding direction, and learning from lived experience can be much harder. When families are estranged or when families do not talk, kids have trouble accessing some of their potentially most valuable resources:

And none of my uncles and aunts are talking to my mother at the moment because she's stubborn, and I get caught in the middle because I talk to all of them and she thinks that I'm betraying her. (Kylie 3:10)

Kids are making sense of their own stories in the context of the bigger stories shared (or not) by their people.

Relationships are repositories of significant information. It therefore comes as no shock that respondents who talk about bad memory, (some even can not remember me or this research from year to year), come from the most fractured social situations:

I can't even remember last year. (Kylie, 3:15)

Among respondents there is a correlation between badly fractured families and those who talk about loss of memory:

... when we were split up, we still moved round a bit and so I can't, 'cause I've got a really bad memory as well, I can hardly remember any of my friends I had when I was younger... now... I've got my friends and I really need them. (Elizabeth 2, 408:416)

There are significant links between memories (or memory) and continuity in significant relationships. To 'need my friends' is an expression of that.

*'It kind of helps put more roots in'*

Elizabeth explains about the impact of these things:

Elizabeth: One thing I've also learnt from my mother is um since she came over here... I learnt all this stuff about the family. 'Cause I never knew much about my mother's side, all I knew about was my uncles and that and I can never remember their wives or my cousins or anything like that. Mum come over and she told me I've got cousins in South America, South Africa and Texas and I'm like: 'Wow, cool, how come I never knew that?' And I didn't realize I had a great grandmother who's still alive 'til she told me. Makes all coming back seem like: 'Wow, cool'.

AW: Wow. What difference does that make to you?

Elizabeth: I don't know, *it kind of helps put more roots in* I suppose. 'Cause all I really knew about was my, my father's side and then I didn't really know that much about them either. And I didn't find out, ... but Nanna and I umm... [w]e used to be really close. 'Cause umm, when we split up... then we moved over here and so I don't really know her now any more, *and so I'm finding out all these stories about what I did when I was younger, what my first word was and stuff like that.* It's very cool to know that. 'Cause I used to hear all my friends go: 'Oh I said: "Mum" when I was younger' [baby's first words] and I'm like: 'Oh, I don't know what I said' (laughs). And like I used to lie - oh that's horrible - I can't remember anything. And now I do know everything, so it's good. (Elizabeth 2, 1966:2003)

AW: What's that like, not having a, not having a history?

Elizabeth: Weird. 'Cause I could hear everybody else talking about it and like I'd keep quiet. Yeah. Like I'd try to talk to Dad about it but he'd go: 'I don't know'. He couldn't even remember half the time what

day we were born on. He'd get us all confused... 'You'll have to ask Mum.' And so Mum come over last [year] and she knew exactly what time we were born and what our first word was and who was the loudest [baby] and it turned out that I was the loudest. Which was, yeah and Judy was the quietest which is really weird cause it's like vice versa now. (Mmm.) Yeah, it's really nice hearing about stuff like that now. I don't feel as left out. And I have both parents near me now, I guess. (Elizabeth 2, 2005:2029)

The point here is the significance, for Elizabeth, of family, of ongoing relationships to knowing who she is and where she has come from. In re-connecting with these stories - her own early stories and her people's stories - she gets a feel for who she is, and just as importantly, for the bigger stories into which her own life fits. She points clearly to the sheer power of not knowing these things in terms of silencing her, and to anxiety, confusion, and isolation.

*'Watching my sister'*

Interviews reveal gendered patterns in resource flows, and this shows up most clearly within families. Among the respondents, young women in particular are learning from *the stories of the women around them*. Interviews show that they (more than their brothers) are gathering resources from vicarious experiences:

AW: Where do you think you get your understandings of how things are going to happen?

Elizabeth: *Watching other people*. 'Cos I seen the mistakes that Judy [my sister]'s done. But then I got to high-school and I saw what Judy was doing and I heard things people were saying and stuff like that. It's kind of like: 'I'm not going to be like that'. It's kind of like that and it's kind of like I'm not going to be like my Mother too 'cos my Mother said, she was going to be a teacher. But then she met Dad and, got married and got pregnant and so she didn't follow it on and like, Oh God I do not want to do that. 'Cos it kind of like ruined her life 'cos she said the other day: 'Boy I wish I'd carried on with teaching'. I'm like: 'You should

have done!’ and like that’s like - Oh my God I don’t believe she didn’t - she would have been really good at it - and that kind of puts perspectives on everything as well. (Elizabeth 2, 1934:1954)

Among respondents, to do this is very ‘woman’. To self-analyze, and to analyze the stories of others around them, is a strongly gendered pattern in this group. The three young men that also do this are drawing heavily on close female relationships and conversations with their mothers:

Pete: So I took it pretty easily half way through the year, didn’t I Mum?

Mum: Pardon? (Mum is in the room making a cuppa.)

Pete: I said I took it pretty easily about half way through the year, I started to slack off a bit.

Mum: Yeah. A bit, yeah. We’ve had a bit of a talk about what needed to be done, didn’t we?

Pete: We talked a couple of weeks ago. (Pete 2, 1114:1136)

Respondents’ grade 7 and 8 essays about role-models also show gendered patterns, in the ways in which young women and young men differently make use of the stories around them. While young women are drawing upon those immediately present (friend, sister) and *their* learnings, young men are usually aspiring to emulate more distant figures (Claude van Damme, basketballers). Among this group of young people, far more than fathers and sons, mothers are instructing their daughters: ‘Don’t do what I did...’ and their daughters are listening to them.

### *Mothers as the lyricists of life*

If life is music... then mother are the lyricists of life. More consistently than anybody else, mothers are the ones putting words to discernible patterns in the world around them, and mentoring their kids as they also put words to them. Most young women and some young men say that Mum really helps them to make sense of things:

[T]here was a whole book that she got on parents helping kids' careers and all this. And she got some stuff for me as well when she was in there... Yeah, she knows that I don't want to make mistakes so she is trying to help me at the moment. Which is really good cause oh I freak out, the idea of choosing a career... (Max 2, 898:915)

Like, um, I sit at home and, cause like my Mum, like I said to her: 'Oh, I'm not going to be able to be a vet.' 'Yes, you've got it in you to be a vet, course you can do it.' So that, that really made me decide a fair bit too. On what I wanted to do, 'cause um, not like she pressured me or anything, it's just she gave me a bit of confidence so I could make a decision sort of. (Sandra 2, 628:634)

These patterns raise some significant questions, particularly for the families of women who find themselves silenced. What happens to inter-generational wisdoms in their families? Will the 'retreating' young women be the lyricists for their kids? Is their silence an echo of their own mothers' silence?

#### *Families - resourcing their kids to different ends*

In 1995 I interviewed six respondents' parents (one or both). Since then, conversations have happened around town, around interviews, when getting permission for interviews, and even during interviews with their kids. Through these conversations, different families reveal a little of how and why they are sharing their resources with their kids.

Parental agendas, what they want for their kids, are one of the things that make a really big difference to what resources are being shared. Success, 'the good', and desirable outcomes are framed quite differently in different homes. Practices reflect quite different understandings and cultural models of conscientious parenting, and different cultural orientations.

- *'Giving them wings' and 'keeping them close'*

It seems that parents' expectations and practices are as globally or locally based as their own kids' stories. The parents of 'exploring' respondents have had deliberate policies for expanding their children's horizons. Helen (Mum) explains:

We had a choice between sending the kids to a private school or taking holidays with them. Now they've been to New Zealand, Thailand and Malaysia. We all love exploring... It also gives the kids more freedom. Layla went to Melbourne and back with her friends when she was 18. *It gives them wings and teaches them not to be frightened.* (Helen 1:26)

Not surprisingly, their son, Pete now also approaches the issue of leaving as a journey of discovery. 'You never know. I could end up anywhere!' (Pete 1:117).

These parents are also fully expecting that their children will go places that they have not been, and have experiences that they have not had. As Helen (tearfully) says: *'Well you don't give them wings to keep them close.'* (Helen 1, 26). Another mother says:

I expect that they may go. There will always be a degree of closeness - I expect that we'll always be close emotionally. (Julie, 1995:17)

By way of contrast, for Jenny (Mum to a 'settling' family), desirable outcomes are measured in terms of family proximity:

He's unemployed and the place he lives is a dump. But he still comes home - we're really lucky that he still comes home, ... we're doing OK. (Reconstructed phone conversation, Jenny, April 1999)

To go outside The Valley lacks meaning for some families, as Noah's Mum explained when he went up to the city to do college:

I'm not really sure why he's gone up there - I think because all 'is friends did. (Field-notes, April 1999)

or Dad:

Well, while there's still no jobs down here he might as well be getting an education. (Phone conversation, May 2000)

Education is named as a 'holding pattern' until Noah can get back to the core business of working down here. Noah's Mum (1995:23) believes that her kids will stay near to home, like she did. Both parents are still looking for a practical opening for him 'down home'.

- *'Negotiation skills' or 'sorting it'*

The processes look quite different in working-class and middle-class homes. Observations, conversations and interviews leave an impression that the former are far more likely to 'be told' and the latter are likely to be 'negotiated with'.

'Exploring' parents say that they are endeavouring to build kids' character, and to do this it seems that they are actually resourcing them with intangible but transferable means which ensure that a wide range of options will be open to them:

Guide them earlier on. Give them background values when they're younger. Also a range of experiences to broaden their outlook. Let them have experiences so they can make good choices. (Howard, 1995:19)

Again (see last chapter) this is Bourdieu's (1984) 'cultural capital' in action. Practices of problem solving is one example. In Pete's story (above), he and parents are deep in negotiations about what he was going to do next year - take a year off and travel, or go straight to uni. The issues are presented to him like a puzzle - so how are you going to solve this one, Peter?

Ways of showing concern, rather than levels of concern differ between these parents. Settling parents acknowledge: 'Our job as parents is to give them a better life and a better education than what we had.' (Bron and Shayne, 1995:31). However, reflecting upon abstract means is not a luxury that all can access. The concrete facts, the current conditions absorb energy:

We're just living from day to day. It's all you can do now. (Bron and Shayne, 1995:34).

'Sorting it' often involves physically embodied interventions. Negotiation by proxy is one example of 'sorting it' (see chapter 5 or Kurt's story above). Here is another mother's way 'sorting it' when the issue is the protection of her child:

Number one the big change came when I put me foot down with the boyfriend. (You said?) 'E came a little bit too close to destroying the family totally. (How?) Give 'er an ultimatum. (Them or me?) ... *so I put me foot down and said if he didn't back off - I'd have him seen to.* (Right.) And I turned round to her and I said: 'Nobody intervenes with this family and tells you not to see me!'. I said: 'You will come here - when you want to - and *if he says no - I'm going to have him taken out and taught a bit of a lesson*'. (Bron 3:9)

Good parenting, by any of these parents' definitions includes protecting the young. This was just one example of more radical 'embodied' protection.

- *Words and ideas or 'doing things'*

Language and the way it is used in different families has profound effects. On the basis of practices of language use, mostly gained at home, young people live in different realities. Language both marks the co-ordinates and fills life with meaningful objects (Berger and Luckmann 1967:21). It delineates exactly what is perceived, framing lived experience quite differently (Strauss 1977). Language-use in some environments allows young people to express their insights and mental life (Willis 1979) and also to practice accounts about their own identity.

Some parents are seeing conversation as a central part of what they are about. Not surprisingly they talk about it easily:

We talk about the future together a lot. At home we try to balance out any negatives by talking things over - about things that are not right - about options and so on. (Julie 1995:18)



Being a part of a family means we share experiences - we wait to hear the stories over lunch - and the whole family - we all experience it. (Helen, 1995:27)

Language gives access, and stories give access, to different ways of understanding the world. Learning can be vicarious and it can be cumulative.

Meanwhile, working class parents were likely to look at me strangely when I asked what they were aiming at for their kids or what parenting is about (as if to say: 'is it not obvious?'). For 4 years the lingering questions were: 'What are you doing?' 'Why?', and 'How?'. They were doing something *different* to middle class parents, and *not just a poor relation of the same practices*. Asking these questions was not providing answers.

A social rule sometimes becomes evident only when it is breached (see Garfinkel 1967). So it was with 'good parenting'. Near the end of the research one mother made some sense of it all:

I'll tell you Ani, half of the parents around here don't *do anything* for their kids - they just live in their own little world - and the kids learn to do nothing - see this poor guy here - he's 18 and he'd never even been on a bus by himself. A lot of parents just don't *do things* with their kids and you need to. (Conversation with parent from field-notes, April 1999)

This parent is not referring to 'talking to your kids' or 'teaching your kids' but to '*do things*' with your kids. This is not about conversations, abstract ideas, theories, or transferable skills, but it involves an embodied and concretized form of enduring faithfulness.

The value of *doing things* with young people cannot be underestimated in terms of individual lives and possibilities. To *do things* with a young person leaves them with significant legacies to which they can return:

- Things that '*I can do*' (history, story, expertise/ competency self-respect);

- Things that '*I could do*' (future, story, exposure to both grounded possibilities with *real-world social, geographical, and experiential connections*).

Indeed, interviews leave absolutely no doubt that for all respondents (but especially for those 'settling'), to '*do things*' is where they get their ideas for their own stories. The value of 'do things' also cannot be underestimated either in this culture, in a town where to 'do things' is both the central social rule and the way to self-respect.

### *Families and their own resources*

Some rural working-class parents are going to extra-ordinary lengths to resource their kids under the current social conditions. This is not to say that middle class parents do not resource their kids, and pay for it, because they do. The difference is that insulating their kids' futures from harsh social conditions, and providing infrastructure for building futures despite those conditions, really seems to be costing some working-class parents enormously.

Amongst rural 'settling' families, resourcing kids is often expressed as extreme faithfulness in infrastructure provision - *finding* the job, *being* the transport, *doing* the liaison - basically being a personified interface to get the kids established. Todd's Dad gets him up to work and back on call, different times every day:

I'll never leave a kid on their own and say - right you're 17, you make your own way.' (Angus, 3:1)

This faithfulness comes at a cost. Todd works in a casual retail job, 30 minutes away by car. Dad drives him there and back every time. Todd gets called in at erratic times on odd days, often to work late and with very little notice: 'It doesn't do to say no when they call you.' 'Why?' 'They stop calling you.' (Todd 3,1). Because of this he can not plan his life. (I had a small taste of this when we had to re-organize our interview 3 times because work had called him in). Dad is on call constantly too; in the way that Todd can not plan his life, Dad cannot either.

Closely related to all of this is the current crisis of the 'settling' families - for whom the very concrete, very grounded, very specific and very applied wisdoms and

learnings of many generations are being devalued by social change. When the rural working-class cultural patterns of providing infrastructure for their kids do not work any more, this leaves whole families at a loss:

I think I got it wrong with the older one. Used to be that getting a job was the answer and *now I don't even know if we did the right thing...* He was making a nuisance of himself at school, so I said: "If you can get a job you don't have to finish." And he did. And then what was I supposed to do. There's only part-time work, casual work now with the apples and that. So he's working half the time and living on nothing the other half.  
(Reconstructed phone conversation with 'Jenny' from April 1999)

The rudeness of the current situation becomes apparent. The rules have been changed: to do what is meaningful, and responsible, to keep kids close and get them jobs, may well be to limit their chances. To have them leave would be to have them shut off from embodied infrastructures (unlike the often disembodied, or more abstract and transferable resources flowing through middle-class parents). To send them out is to send them somewhere that parents cannot be with them, cannot *do things* with them, and cannot guide or protect them. What we are witnessing is a severe disruption of cultural patterns. The social changes happening in rural communities like Geeveston (eg. rationalization, changes in industry, loss of jobs) are doing violence to these traditional resource flows, rituals and ways of life.

Social change leaves most parents a little out of their depth, but some are being stretched a little further. Parents are being called upon to go places where they have not been before, and some of them are finding the resources to get there. Bron, a working-class parent realises that to get back into the work-force, Judith is going to need all of the schooling that she can get. So the family all go to the TAFE orientation day, with her. She says (laughing heartily):

Bron: I just sat down and crossed me arms - all went over the top of me.

Judith: 'Cos all these subjects you do and that they say it in different computer ways and Mum didn't understand what they were trying to say.

Bron: So I was just a pretty face in the crowd (laughing). (Bron 3:10)

For Bron this has involved a quite uncomfortable and disarming decision to go right outside her own comfort zone. But she knew that it was important to be there.

There is a lot of different action in the interface between families and institutions / systems. Connell et. al. (1982) have been looking at these patterns in relation to schools. Where there are histories of familiarity or trust with institutions, respondents and their families are far more comfortably able to 'ad-lib' in negotiations, drawing upon them and their resources as required.

On the other hand, where there are histories of mistrust, other strategies are involved. As they face their own kids' unemployment, the Eldridges are re-mortgaging their house to plant an orchard where they can work. Schools, Centrelink, the tax office (et al) have all blended together to become a 'hostile other'. They know, from lived experience, that they can expect little practical help, and they find little sense or hope, and above all, *little dignity* in their interface with 'the system'.

Amongst all of these families, the 'bottom-line' of parenting is preparing kids for futures (infrastructure, promise of infrastructure, advocacy). To parents of different cultural orientations, this means different things, though, with different implications.

I think what you gotta do is keep giving them direction. (Jenny, April 1999)

Parenting is about preparing them for later life. Trying to get them to handle money properly, teaching them to mix, teaching them manners... (Howard, 1995:19)

However, not all families involved in this research seem to be quite kid-focussed or even 50-50 kid-focussed. In some situations, parents' own issues or crises clearly have the floor:

I can't have Simon at home - it's just too stressful. We fight all the time and with my [health problem] I just can't handle it. (Reconstructed conversation with parent before son's interview, 1997)

This can be a specific crisis for a specific time, but for others, negotiating around a parents' crisis is a way of life. One example of this is Beth and Brett's family. Family practices revolve much more around managing Dad's issues than equipping kids in any way. Dad flies into a rage at the thought of each of them leaving home. Beth explains later that she effectively needed her partner as a 'bodyguard' for the manoeuvre, and also afterwards: 'while he got used to the idea' (Beth, 2). She also explains that keeping the kids at home is as much about access to their money as anything. He is an alcoholic. Rather than ideas of fostering independence, his own thirst / immediate needs / survival is paramount in their negotiations. In a society that is not always good at resourcing the sick to get well, these kids are not only unsupported, but they carry the full weight of their father.

Less dramatic but also evident are other families who seem to have 'abdicated' – families who simply do not or can not prioritize equipping their kids. They suggest that they have 'given up' on the wider situation:

AW: Do you reckon your kids will get jobs?

Mum: Nah, not down ere.

AW: Is it ok if they don't ?

Mum: Yeah I'd say so. 'Specially if there's no jobs about. If there's no jobs, there's not much choice'. (1995:37)

or that they have given up on their kids:

'E's lazy. 'E likes the money but he doesn't want to earn it. 'E's never done anything. (Bron, 1995:30)

Kylie's mum offered a mini-history as we headed upstairs to do her interview:

See if you can get some sense out of her - I haven't been able to get any yet. (Janice, from Kylie 2, 1997)

If they are not talking much or doing things together, parents' and child's stories - their definition of the situation - can be very independent and very distinct. This also leaves the child with fewer resources to draw on in terms of building their own futures - fewer ideas, fewer life-wisdom and fewer exposures:

Kylie: I need a new Mum, would you adopt me? (both laugh)

AW: I remember you asked me that 2 years ago too. What do I do that your Mum doesn't?

Kylie: I don't know, you talk to me. (Kylie 3:10-11)

They have more 'hassle' to push through in their own negotiations:

Suzy: I've had a really bad childhood - I've had a really messed up childhood...

AW: Do you feel like your life has been really complicated by your parents?

Suzy: Oh - *very*! (Suzy 3:5-6)

The value of parents is not lost on the luckier respondents. Mel puts it well:

So, I have family support, so I think that's fairly important, so if you want to do something you've got to have support... See, I have lots of friends, like their parents don't support them at all and they're just like, *it's like a battle to do everything*. (Mel 2, 657:669)

The significance of family support in creating a life cannot be understated.

Supportive families are providing kids with tools for creativity, and as best they are able, also different layers of protection around kids own negotiations with the world.

The picture I get when I engage with almost every respondent's family is of people who are doing the very best that they can by their kids, with the resources that they have got. This is the point: *different families have access to different resources*.

*Parents can only give kids the resources they have been able to access themselves.*

In a society riddled with inequalities, of course these resources will continue to be quite different.

### *Peers*

Peers are sources of practical things and of new opportunities - young people continually go places and do things together. They are often implicated in each others' habits (see research on Australian youth subcultures and identities eg. Walker 1987; or more recently Snow 1999; Forrester 1999; Ogilvie and Lynch 1999; Noble et al. 1999). Equally interesting, though, are peers' roles in sharing symbols and ideas, and doing 'reality checks'. Respondents (particularly young women) report constantly 'reality checking' against each other. Friends can be invaluable reflectors and co-creators of identity:

Yeah. Like me and Sarah, we've been together and everything since grade 7. Umm, yeah, we know heaps about each other. We tell each other everything. We share everything. (Kylie 2, 2091:2116)

The role of peers becomes especially significant when family are not available. Several respondents are drawing heavily on peers for their insights and projects. In interviews they voice their appreciation of these life-lines:

Actually, she's very important. Like, if I didn't have a friend like her, I don't know what I would have done. (Kylie 2, 2091:2116)

Although relationships with peers are often characterized by trust and faithfulness, they lack the benefits of inter-generational insights, breadth of life-experience or wisdom. Many of the ideas shared do not mesh with broader realities. Simon wants to become a famous DJ. This is his only dream. His best friend has told him that if he really wants to become one, he will: 'That's all you need to do - really want it and really believe it.' (Simon, 3). When I ask, Simon will elaborate no other plans because, encouraged by his friends, he is adamant that this one is going to happen.

Peer groups may be functioning very creatively, but from narrow resource-bases. Sarah and friends analyze everything: 'the way boys don't' (Sarah, 3) but the tools

are drawn largely from each other and from mass media input. Although together they have quite sophisticated habits of storying and analysis, they have access to limited symbolic tools with which to do this (eg. stories of romance and betrayal and concepts like ‘being true to yourself’) and little language for the broader social context in which they are seeking their private destinies. As such, they do have limited repertoires of stories available for making sense of their own lives.

Young people can sometimes provide each other with the most faithful and consistent relationships that they have. But they can only share with each other what they can access from the social world around them. And those who can only draw from peers have access to not just a limited range of ideas, but a limited range of habits and practical resources. Kylie’s group of close friends party at the weekend, and they are her only human confidantes and companions. Since she has discovered that partying is something she would like to avoid, she now spends her spare time ‘doing absolutely nothing’ (Kylie, 3). Party vs. nothing: She has no other options on offer.

### *School*

Whether implicitly or explicitly, respondents are often citing their old school as a source of ideas, habits, and practical resources:

[my teacher] said, ‘cause I was talking to her about teaching. She said that it’s hard becoming a teacher. ‘Cause of all the school, so that’s kind of a bit daunting as well. (Elizabeth 2, 155:157)

Came back here - went in the shop – [my] teacher was there and he said they’re looking for a trainee at Woodman’s, so I went over, and he said come back at 9 in the morning – [I got an] interview ... started work the day after that. (Brett 3:4)

The school, more than any other source (except some families), has been instrumental in opening respondents’ possibilities beyond the local. When I interviewed six staff members in 1995, senior and junior teachers alike pointed to this as their mandate:



This is the central point of the school. It's classed as a disadvantaged area. We receive funding to broaden kids' horizons. (Teacher, 1995:55)

Our cultural enrichment budget goes to expanding their world - getting them out there, we want to widen relationships, values, the way they look at the world. Here outlooks are restricted - knowledge of current affairs, even among adults is really poor. (Teacher, 1995:49)

A broad range of 'horizon-expanding' activities have been happening throughout the curriculum (and beyond). From before-school-hours 'life-skills' programs of cooking and eating breakfast, to the yearly 'City scavenger hunt' for all senior students, to weekly Saturday night pilgrimages to the basketball in Hobart, the emphasis has been upon taking students to new places (physically, symbolically or in practice) so that they may go there again themselves.

Staff point to the conditions within which many of the students grow up: to poverty in families; the 'slow social development' of many; to students who were 'bright eyed and full of hope' when they started high school but who became 'despondent' by the time they understood their options; to a culture where education has not been seen as useful; and to parents who themselves were scared of the school (perhaps because of their own childhood experiences).

Radical new directions were adopted by the school in the early 1990s 'after a particularly bad patch'. Changes were for 'teacher survival', and 'harm minimization' for all involved as much as they were about 'maximising opportunities'. The resulting changes meant transforming programs within the school from ones where many students could not succeed, to ones where all could (and very publicly - due to the community-building ethos of Huon News). Making school relevant to local people meant substantial alterations to the curriculum (eg. life-skills subjects, the school farm, and boat-building). Other priorities have included constant creation of bridges between community and school (at the time of early interviews there were 150 parent and community volunteers involved in the school), and between Geeveston and the outside world (as above). The school's task

has been understood as not simply academic but social. This has created interesting struggles over priorities.

As a 'liminal' community of not-quite-insiders, not-quite-outsiders of Geeveston, the teachers at this school have a huge potential to shape local young people's lives. A teacher confesses: 'I see the school as the one shining light for many of these kids.' (Teacher 1995:59). For these teachers, their source of their greatest power is also the biggest limitation that they face. They are mostly 'outsiders' who bring new ideas in. They know that what they have been doing is both important and in many instances, counter-cultural:

I try to extend kids to a fraction more than what they're capable of. But if it's not subtle they refuse to do it. It's better not to try. A little success leads to more, and to willingness to have a go. (Teacher, 1995:58)

Consistent policies and radical curriculum would mean nothing without trust relationships. They still do mean nothing to some kids and their families. Some students remain inaccessible, just as teacher worldviews and class projects are to these young people. But deliberate and consistent policies, *combined with trust relationships* can make a large impact in a small community. Some teachers have settled locally. Appointments of a core of them now span decades in The Valley.

Individual teachers have had powerful impacts on many respondents' lives (I have analysis codes dedicated to respondents' 'mentor-teacher' or 'faithful teacher' stories). Low student numbers, small class sizes, and relative intimacy with students have allowed specific teachers to be powerful mentors and prophets to many, and as such, shapers of student culture. Six (mostly long-serving and mostly senior) teachers are repeatedly singled out by respondents. These reports come from not just academic students, but also kids experiencing academic and life-problems:

I can honestly say that I miss all of the Geeveston teachers. 'Cos I loved that school so much. The teachers down there are too good to be teachers - they shouldn't be teachers they should be my friends. (Kylie 3:4)

Yeah Mr (\*) was always having me into his room for talks and that - whenever he got me into trouble he'd always know that there was something wrong so I'd end up in his office having a big talk to him or out in the corridor - he'd just always talk to you and stuff. (Ex-student 'Leigh', from fieldnotes, 13 April 1999)

It is impossible to say how many of the positive changes that have occurred since this research started are a direct result of extremely committed, ongoing and intentional relationships of these (not quite) outsiders. Several school-leavers spoke quite cynically about their futures and scathingly about the school during early interviews. More recently, although students may have been critical of individual teachers or subjects, it was very hard to find a school-leaver in 1997 or 1999 who would curse the school. The adage - that pessimism grows with age - had disappeared. Changes are most evident among school-leavers, who were *still children* when the policy directions shifted, and were even younger when key staff appeared. These stories also suggest that criteria for 'mentor-effectiveness' and group cultural shifts involve not just issues of mutual respect, but also time invested (over *years*).

Levels of trust in schooling still vary, and so does the impact of the school on different young people. Also, for many, the established and strong bonds of trust do not easily transfer into new areas (eg. looking for work outside the district or 'going on' to year 11 and 12). Changes *are* happening in young people's engagement in the outside world (see chapter 5) but much slower.

Meanwhile, all of this has been happening in a context where much is being expected of teachers. Going places (physically, symbolically, in practice) with students means issues of finite people, finite time and finite resources. In a climate of constant attacks on education funding, the changes discussed above are remarkable. Respondents' stories highlight the importance of ongoing resources for this kind of public infrastructure. Funds being pulled out of the public education system pose a direct threat to local, committed and very effective communities like this small school.

## *Communities*

Young people's communities shape who they become. Different kids have access to different communities: communities of interest, networks, family friends, sports teams, and ham radio networks. Some are drawing resources from global communities, others, more local. But there are also those who are embedded (globally or locally) and those who are adrift.

Fragmented networks are often a symptom of parents' crisis. Marriage breakdowns, poverty, and cheap housing mean that some respondents' families are mobile and socially disembedded. In this way the most mobile young people can also become some of the least resourced. 'Wandering' families lose potential to be known, and for both real and acting extended kin to resource their kids.

Within the Geeveston community itself, some are both embedded and stigmatized. These are kids from families who are at odds with community sentiment. In a small town, shared sentiment and practice can be extremely punitive, leaving 'retreating' kids unable to draw resources from even the figures consistently around them.

Communities can only give kids the things that they can access themselves. As shown in chapter 3, the impacts of social change (globalization of world markets, technological change, government and private sector rationalizations) have savaged many of the things that Geeveston had to offer its' young people (eg. jobs, futures, services). Meanwhile respondents' stories are clearly highlighting the importance of resourcing and protecting local communities, for their sake.

## *Mass media*

Mass media are functioning quite differently to other sources. Media flows are almost always implicated by respondents' uncertainty about 'where I got that idea'. Rebekah is responding incredulously to a transcript of previous interview:

I must have got that from a Dolly magazine or something. I don't know why I would have said that... (Rebekah 3:1)

Exchanges between mass media and young people must be less memorable-event-based processes than flows between individual actors. Rather, there is a kind of saturation by a slow drip of ideas, which although subtle, is very powerful. These sources can leave a trail of material that has little integration into young people's worlds of everyday life:

Ben: Yeah, I wouldn't mind going to umm America. Travel in America.

AW: Why America?

Ben: I don't know. *I've always just liked it.* (Ben 2, 961:966)

More than ever before, via mass media, young people in rural Australia will be drawing ideas from other worlds. Among this respondent group, this has varied implications. In some respondents stories they have clearly been useful for expanding horizons and providing new ideas. Chapter 7 tells Pete's story of awakening to issues of racism in America and Australia after a TV program. After doing sociology in year 11, Rebekah is using reportage of current affairs to sharpen her own perceptions. During her grade 9 interview, Elizabeth engages in some elegant moral 'hypotheticals', resourced by themes from 'Sabrina the teenage witch':

'Cause like you wish you were a witch so sense that you could change your clothes and make yourself really popular and stuff like that, but then you think about it, the stuff she does is quite bad cause you can't really change people's opinions or that without discussing it with them first.  
(Elizabeth 2, 1694:1698)

Interviews show, though, that respondents are making use of media input very differently. In one of his grade 8 essays, Ben relays some of the messages that he is receiving. (For ease of reading this time, spelling has been corrected, punctuation added):

I plan to have a good wife, children, a big house, swimming pool, BMW, one 4WD, a Falcon and a Torana and a good income and *if I want these bad, I will get them.* (Ben, 1995:1)

Some respondents are claiming highly commercialized images as their own stories:

AW: What do you see yourself actually doing?

Phoebe: Something in entertainment, behind the scenes.

AW: Does it pay though?

Phoebe: I don't know - be the next Stephen Spielberg.

AW: Aah that pays - but how do you get there?

Phoebe: Prob'ly got to go to uni as usual.

AW: You really don't want to go to uni?

Phoebe: Oh - my cousin's going to uni - she hates it. (She changes the subject.) (Phoebe 3:4)

Some young people's stories (examples immediately above) stand out because of their lack of passionate connections to everyday projects in the real world. Phoebe is in year 11 but is not involved in any theatre or production work. These stories correspond with fragmented networks, and with absent 'significant others'.

Storylines from TV are most heavily made use of by those who have access to few real-world stories that give their lives meaning. The problem is, though, as Bruner (1987:21) suggests, unless individuals' stories 'mesh' with those of their communities, both 'tellers and listeners will surely be alienated...'

A related issue is that input from media sources is primarily symbolic - in the realm of ideas. This is quite unlike other sources where within trust relationships (eg. with family, friends, school, community) information may well be backed by opportunity, where shared practice makes things possible, where means or chances of real-world-assistance often accompany goals.

Figure 7 shows the sources that different respondents are drawing upon. It will look familiar (from chapter 4, revisited in chapter 5). An extra layer of analysis has been added; the vertical axis focuses on flows of ideas, or goals, while the horizontal axis focuses upon flows of real world assistance, physical resources and practices - the social means of attainment. For respondents who are 'exploring', global goals and global means are available through the combination of trusted sources (listed). For those 'settling', local goals accompany local means. For those 'retreating', trusted sources are providing access to little of either, *whilst for those 'wandering', global*

goals accompany very limited real means. Media input in particular entails a disjuncture of ends and means, the ideas and the practical resources and habits with which to follow-through. Laura (see chapter 4) never did become a model. After fleeing to the city, she fled back to Geeveston. She lives in The Valley alone with her baby.

**Figure 7: Means, goals, sources, and different resource flows**

Goals: (flows of ideas)	global	Exploring	Wandering
		family, school, peers, local community, non- local communities of interest, TV, mags, books	TV, peers, isolated family members, isolated teachers
	local	Settling	Retreating
		family, peers, local community	peers or isolated family members
		many	few
Means of attainment: (flows of real-world assistance)			

What the mass media bring, different above all, is the *decontextualized idea*. Because TV introduces things from outside respondents’ relational and accessible world, some respondents are able to use this powerfully to expand their horizons (as above: Elizababeth, Rebekah, Pete). Where other sources and resources are abundant, TV becomes just one more useful source.

However, the mass media are different to other sources by being *disembodied*. An idea is accessed by the respondent, but there is no relational ‘other’ on the hook, and so the source remains unaccountable for any practical follow-through or any real-world assistance. Also, backed by international corporate dollars, most media conglomerates are not driven by any particular benevolence or concern for these rural young people. Ironically the best-resourced sources are also the ones who will help some respondents least. This study suggests that *mass media, as sources, are powerful supplements but poor substitutes* for other more immediate, mutual, and embodied flows of resources. This links back to the writing of other theorists (eg.

see Furlong and Cartmel 1997), that mass communications have the effect of distorting reality, whilst opportunities and life chances continue to be structured by the circumstances in which individuals live.

### **How young people themselves are being implicated in resource flows**

Other writers about youth have (I believe rightly) suggested that Bourdieu's (1984) notion of 'cultural capital' 'exaggerates a good insight.' (Connell et al. 1982:188). In that model, young people become only vessels of things passed on by others, *tabula rasa*, and effectively obliterated. Respondents *are part of resource flows*, through their engagement with social others and with the resources that those others bring. Also, though, *encounters are shaped by the resources that they bring*. It is not just group culture but idiosyncratic understandings and practices that are involved. Negotiations reflect the ways in which social life is being differently understood and storied by each individual, on the balance of cultural and biographical history. These young people also become sources for others.

#### *Closing down / going underground*

Respondents' openness to new resource flows depends upon group and biographical history. Recurring hurts, disappointments and violence (symbolic or physical) are leading to withdrawal from, and / or restriction of resource flows:

I used to always stay in my room. Like I'm a very roomy person. I just stay in there. And then I got sick, I had glandular fever. Then I stayed there even more... But everything's calmed down now... I think that's why [I came out]... Cause I'm, I can't stand confront-ion stuff, I'd just rather sit back and watch if it, if there's a fight going on... And so, I don't know, I just can't stand screaming... (Elizabeth 2, 829:867)

Violence shows up as individuals 'close down' in different ways, including a lack of willingness to engage (eg. in social relationships and in others' stories):



I don't know. I think maybe I don't believe in love any more because every time you love somebody they always go away. So I think I've just given up on that too. (Kylie 3:14)

As shown earlier, resource flows can close down in relation to specific mistrusted sources, but also as a more generalized way of being in the world. Some respondents (like Elizabeth) retrospectively explain closing down over seasons of crisis. However, other personal and cultural histories have individuals more resolutely removed from new resource flows:

Well I'm not a very hopeful person - I don't hope for nuffing... I don't hope for nothing. I can say I hope... [but it never happens]. So you just stop hoping for stuff after that. (Kylie 3:13)

There are strong links between hope and the inclination of respondents to engage. Over the five years of field-work there are those who have just seemed to have closed down (a little or a lot) more in every interview. They do this both in relation to social others, in relation to the stories that they tell (or will not tell any more, for example 'retreating' young women). Far from being irrational or lazy, these strategies can be absolutely necessary for self-protection. Sustained close-downs, though, become part of compounding social processes. With age and lost opportunities (as schools finish with them, as they leave the known world, as familiar others leave them) close-downs are leading to (inward spiralling) patterns of not being able to draw upon new relationships or upon new resources.

#### *Respondents' engagements with their own stories*

Respondents' habits of storying - of inquiry, of attempts to explore, integrate and /or understand - each show trust in their own observations, judgements and feelings. Through their stories, resources are flowing freely from other times and places into now (or not). Sustained experiences of being trashed (by others and by life) are leading not just to an unwillingness to engage deeply with others but also with themselves:

- Kylie: Oh 'cos these days I just don't take my feelings seriously. I don't know why but I just don't. I can say that I hate this person but I know that I don't - and I can say that I like this person but I know that I hate them.
- AW: So does it become like all a bit of a game?
- Kylie: Yeah - you get sick of saying stuff to people when they don't listen to you. It's like: 'go away I don't want to speak to you'... I don't know. So you learn not to take your feelings seriously.  
(Kylie 3:14)

In her statement Kylie is drawing close links between the kind of respect shown by others (repeatedly) and the level of respect that she can show to herself. Equally significantly, though, she draws links between the way that life validates her storying and the way that she bothers to story life. Young people who do not trust many others (in a given situation) but are trusting their own judgements have something fairly substantial to fall back on. On the other hand, individuals who do not trust themselves, their own judgements and perceptions, are losing ground fast. The fact that Kylie can articulate these things *at all* suggests that she is far from losing the fight. To even hold these stories together is to put considerable faith in her own judgement, and her stories give her some useful material to work with.

These things become an issue particularly when communities are not telling stories which young people can believe. In Kylie's situation we can see tandem struggles for subjectivity (see McDonald 1999) and self-respect as ongoing, even played out during the interview. Interviews with other respondents suggest the same struggle.

### *Tenacity, creativity, and the will to live*

Some respondents are showing great resourcefulness (resource-fullness or possession) within their struggles for self-respect and subjectivity. Always, when there is self-respect with no visible means of support, their stories will reveal a 'significant other' from the past who taught them that they were valuable:

... her name's Judy. She was 64 last time I saw her. She um, she was like my grandma, but I didn't have a grandma... and like she was just

always there. She'd take me everywhere. We used to go down to Geilston Bay and feed the ducks and we had fun. We'd go to toys shops and KFC and.... We used to do heaps of things together... Um I haven't seen her since, and like just the last 6 or 7 months I've been thinking about her, like I wonder what she's doing now. (Kylie 2, 2018:2047)

Such others are travelling-partners with respondents, even if only in their stories.

In the car (parked) after Kylie's third interview, when we are talking about how she has changed, she insists: 'You tell me.' (This is the same young woman who says: 'My mother never talks to me', and whose mother says: 'See if you can get any sense out of her, I can't'). When asked again, she takes a playful strangle-hold around my neck and shakes: 'I need this Ani! I need you to tell me... how I've changed!'.

This playful exchange, I believe, is also deadly serious. The story is alarming and hopeful. It is alarming firstly because it shows a young woman earnestly trying to hold her stories together, but very poorly resourced for this task by those around her. Her only trusted sources are a handful of close peers (and it is a good thing that they are around). Secondly, I am a researcher, and I now only appear once every year or two. She barely knows me, and if we take what she says at face-value, I am her best adult offer for this mentoring process. It is alarming, thirdly because Kylie is not the only respondent who seems to be grasping desperately at the (quite transient) interview process to give her a reality-check and reflection of herself. During his third interview Simon does not talk much but he keeps rocking and sniffing, and saying: 'play the tape again. Can'y play the tape again'.

But Kylie's story is also hopeful. In our encounters, she is resourcefully, strategically, and playfully going after what she says she needs. At another level, she just authored part of a fairly clear mandate or job-description for anyone who seeks to be useful to young people in her situation (become co-story-er, reality-check, listen, thicken). That is a useful insight.

## Continuities over time

There are many things that stay the same from story to story, interview to interview, parent to child. These are the 'continuities'. During her third interview, Sonia is looking at her pile of essays and transcripts for the first time (I had failed to get it to her earlier). At the same time she is unknowingly telling a story that she also told in her second interview:

[My parents are] going to wait till we get a bit older and move out - they reckon they're going to build a one bedroom house so we can't stay there (laughs). Said: 'Doesn't matter we got tents! Pitch them on the back lawn'. (She pauses and stares at her transcript.) Oh I actually, just I just told you this (laughs.) I just read that then! (laughs.) I already told you that. (Sonia 2, 710:716 and 3:22)

We both laugh in recognition, and we are surprised that 2 years later, not just the stories but even the conversations within them are the same. This is an extreme example of what happens constantly in interviews. These young people's lives are thematic, and they usually have continuity of access to the same significant resources and relationships, to similar practical, symbolic and habitual material that they had available last time.

The continuities in young people's lives are part of bigger patterns. Each is accessing their resources through their networks, but *their networks, in turn, have different networks*. Another way of putting this is that *each is accessing resources through particular trusted others* (individuals, groups, institutions and systems), who are in turn *also being differently resourced by their trusted others*.

This has clear implications for each in terms of understanding *agency*, but *also life-chances* and equity issues. This is particularly so if we recognise that trusted others can be *not just individuals* but *groups, institutions and systems*. These things make up social structure. Differentiated patterns of resources, opportunities and real-world possibilities are the result. Another result is islands of culture (subcultures), with *access to different tools*, different ways of doing things and understanding the world, and different knowledges and ignorances. In terms of patterns in respondents'

trajectories, these differences have shown up as different cultural orientations ('exploring', 'settling', 'wandering', and 'retreating'). Circumstance and cultural practices are complementing, amplifying and compounding each other within lives and between generations.

These things also make sense of what happens under conditions of social change. Those with more limited networks, those with fewer diversified resources, those who are drawing upon the most localized of sources are the ones who are being hardest hit by rationalizations in government services, by changes in labour and industry, and by the shrinking of this little town. It is not just that kids own networks are small and localized, but that their *networks' networks resources are being depleted*.

### *Changes within continuities*

Even in the most consistent of stories, though, there are marked changes over time. Sonia's 1995 (grade 8) essay:

Who do I look up to? My Auntie... nice, helps me do things, tells me about being a secretary, helps with the keyboard, she has time for anyone... She is going to help me with work studies. (1:1)

echoes in her 1997 interview:

[Y]eah I guess [she's] basically where I get the idea from and because I like typing and stuff like that as well. I like computers... Yeah, and when I done work experience as well, they also said some good things about it, that they reckon that I'm capable of doing it, so. (2, 178:186)

and in her 1999 interview:

What I'm doing this year - here now - is a program where you just, we get assignment like typing up letters and typing to businesses... prepare memos, knowing how do leader dots, tabs... but basically just how to use the computer. (Sonia 3:1-2)

As careers (in the broadest sense) unfold, language, ideas, and technical understandings become more sophisticated, and stories about selves are woven more intricately into projects. But stories are also changing with circumstances, and discredited ideas get ‘cooled out’ with increased life-experience and maturity. These patterns are familiar (to some extent) in all interviews.

### *In the moments*

The continuities in young people’s lives are made up of millions of moments - of tiny incidents where particular resources flow (or not):

[M]y Dad, we used to like, I am into electronics, he is into mechanical things, like fixing things. So *we used to always fix things* and when we, the car ever broke down, me and Dad used to fix the car and stuff like that...

AW: So you reckon [your new job] grew out of the mechanical stuff with him?...

Max: Yeah. Yeah, well um, *well it grew out because Dad gave me a*, one of those little square nine volt batteries and he gave me a light bulb and he said: ‘There you go’, and that was when I was 4 years old or something, so then I just went: ‘Oh cool.’ And then I found a speaker, or I think it might have been a modem or something and made that work so, it just grew out of there. And then I put the things together and *they didn’t always work, but I put things together*. And grade three I brought a radio to school, which I fixed, which was like up the putt, so I opened it up and found... a little wire was broken off, and I put it back on *and it worked and I thought it was legendary so, that built up confidence with something little...* (Max 2, 1227:1281)

From the well-targeted gift of a battery and a light-bulb a career is born. Strange things happen when respondents’ engagement is met with a ‘win’. A win leads to further engagement, which *sometimes* leads to a win... In the same way that disengagement compounds itself, engagement is breeding new engagements. Added

to this, each type of resource will operate like a currency in its own right, unlocking other resources (see previous chapter). Further, stories show how often these patterns are also amplified or magnified many-fold by serendipitous events.

‘Serendipity’ is about unpredictable and fortuitous connections, coincidences and other little gifts of circumstance. Every story about real-world passions or vocations is made up from such strings of events and encounters. Alyssa is going to Adelaide to study podiatry. Work-experience convinced her that this is the kind of career she seeks. She chose the work-experience placement after a conversation with her family doctor. The podiatrist with whom Alyssa did work-experience (now a mentor) went to Switzerland last year. It is now Alyssa’s dream to travel to Switzerland one day...

Through their social engagements, unexpected happenings or chance meetings are multiplying respondents’ opportunities many-fold. Each engagement potentially leads respondents into contact with new people who may become trusted others, who introduce them to new ideas / resources, which lead them into contact with new people... These runaway sequences are easy to map and understand in hindsight but impossible to predict.

This is also one of the mechanisms by which inequalities of opportunity persist. Differences in respondents’ life-chances happen when some are involved in circumstances where the same or similar flows keep happening, while for others, flows are reduced. Meanwhile, still others are involved in exponential or outward spiralling patterns which loop successively to new resources, to new projects and to new trusted others (individuals, groups, institutions and systems). The ‘haves’ are always getting more and the ‘have nots’ continue to have not. Lack of social engagement leaves little room for serendipity.

Along with these continuities in patterns, respondents’ stories also feature major turning points or changes.

## Changes

Generally this thesis will have created a picture of continuities in circumstance, of relative predictability in trajectories, of young people's lives that nestle comfortably into familiar patterns. Over 5 years of fieldwork, though, a few individual respondents' trajectories have also proven to be less than predictable:

- Noah, (earlier cast as the archetypal 'settling' respondent) is now finishing year 12. He says that if there is nothing local available, he might seek a job in Hobart;
- Alex, a well-resourced 'exploring' kid, left school in the middle of year 11 and did not know what he was going to do next;
- Suzy, in her second interview is involved in Hobart's drug scene, expelled from school, alienated from family, and very fragmented in storytelling. Earlier she had been 'exploring' but this time, is she 'wandering'? By her third interview she has changed mode again. She can coherently explain what this crazy few years has taught her, and where she is going now as she prepares for university;
- Beth, who in her first interview was very much 'retreating' (she would only say 'I dunno' and shrug apologetically), can now tell a simple, hopeful story of where she has been, and where she and her young family might go next.

These stories show that we could *never* say kids who were 'wandering' or 'retreating', were all doomed from the start, that those 'settling' would all linger (either happily employed or unemployed and embittered), in The Valley, or that all 'exploring' kids would go on smoothly, successfully, and well-supported to live happily-ever-after in middle-class suburbia.

Engaging with the changes in lives, and with surprises in the data is a useful practice. It is in interrogating the surprises (the data, not the respondent) *with respondents*, retrospectively, that the most interesting findings emerge. Questions like: 'What happened to you!?', 'How on earth did you get here?'; or 'Can you tell me how this happened?' lead to collaborative projects where they tell stories and/or theorize as we both name the changes that we see. Together we are mining older stories for new meanings. At this point several respondents are able to speak directly to the issues of empowering / disempowering changes in their lives, to say what has happened for them, and their stories are well worth re-telling.



In interviews, we focus on the changes that respondents see as meaningful. That is, if *they* identify changes, we focus there. If *I* identify changes and these have little resonance with their own stories, we move on. The changes that they choose to talk about are both great and small (eg. succeeding at a project, car accident, becoming a champion, losing a dream, gaining a career, losing a pet, gaining a Mum, losing a Dad), but they invariably link back to themes of empowerment and disempowerment. That is, the stories link back to common themes of individuals gaining or losing the resources with which they can make a life.

### *Turning points*

Turning points in young people's lives and stories represent a moment or a series of moments where there is a shift in resources - at a critical mass. The shift may be about gain, and/or loss of significant resources. The moment may be a single event (eg. a car accident, getting a job) or may be many little moments (new friends, repeated failure). While, for the observer, these events can be hard to pick, to the individual concerned, one significant shift of resources can change everything. This is particularly so if it involves stories about identity.

Alex's back injury means more than an inability to play the sport he loves. With the injury goes a dream, a passion, a career in sports and in sports medicine. These were central to his stories about identity. His dropping out of college with no plans might make no sense to an outsider, but from his perspective, there is simply no reason to continue. A profound loss of meaning is a crisis:

I can't think straight, all I am is angry. (Alex 3:20)

While at one level, the termination of her relationship with her father is tragic, Suzy has a lot of other things going for her. Why then all this 'crazy' or 'risky' (sic) teenage behaviour - wagging, drugging, frenetic changes of story? She is a 'bright kid'. It is only if we were to look back to her first interview that we might notice how closely intertwined her stories about identity and worldview, politics and mission statement are in her relationship with her father. By her third interview she is settled again, but has abandoned 'all that hippy crap' (3:6), many of the politics

and beliefs that she shared with her father. The loss of this significant relationship also meant, for a time, the crippling loss of stories about identity and what she was about.

### *Losing and finding the plot*

‘Losing the plot’ - a colloquial phrase, is actually a very apt description of a significant social process. Crisis entails the loss of the plot or the story-line, and story is about ongoing relationship to self and to the world. Further, story is the conduit through which so many other resources (from past and present) flow. *Losing the plot means a stem in the flow of all kinds of resources.*

Something that stood out starkly from interviews was the interrelationship of different kinds of resources - practical, symbolic and habit. *Those in crisis, those who lose their story, also concurrently lose their way and lose their voice.* When individuals lose their way and their voice, they are in a far worse position to access new resources:

I just got so bogged down - totally - and once you get bogged down you can’t do anything - like you can’t get back out of it - because it’s too hard. (Suzy 3:3)

This was also true with the resource flows between us. I was far less useful to the voiceless, just as they were far less available to me. Young people in crisis were always the hardest to negotiate with (and it was visibly hardest for them too). This again raises questions about the ‘retreating’ young women who stopped talking to me. What was happening to their stories?

The best insights about change, crisis and resource flows happen when respondents emerge from their crisis and have a story to tell. In lieu of a grade 10 interview, Richard had yelled: ‘I’ve got nothing to say to you!’. Two years later he explained: ‘Sorry about that, I didn’t know what I was going to do.’ (Richard 3:1)

In the same way that losing the plot is about loss of story, ‘finding the plot’ is literally about finding a significant storyline. Our conversations reveal concurrent

shifts of new resources, finding their stories, finding their way (practical resources, ways of doing it), and finding their voice:

Mum helps a lot now though, cause I can talk to her about everything. I go home and I tell her everything that's happened. But I never used to [be able to] do that. *I've come more open, I reckon.* (Elizabeth 2, 819:825)

During re-interviews, I was stunned at the changes in Beth ('I dunno' - see chapter 4). Beth has a new mentor (partner) in her life, who spends a lot of time both interpreting the world to her, and listening to her. On her second visit, with some excitement, she haltingly told me the barest outline of her story. Several times during the story she called on her partner to translate for her, nodding furiously as he did. At 18 years of age, Beth tentatively was learning a language with which she could understand and communicate 'past, present, future, and me'. As she did this, she began to make sense of her past. As she made sense of, and found meaning in her past, she could think about what makes sense for her future: 'I'd like to work in a shop, in our own business, and bring up two kids. I reckon I might be good at that.'. As I left, Beth invited me to come back in a year so she could continue telling her story.

Something which cannot be emphasized enough is the significance of trusted others in facilitating these changes.

#### *Why changes happen sometimes*

Changes are about shifts in resource flows, but these shifts need to be of a critical mass:

Elizabeth: Everything's kind of changed this last year.

AW: I reckon. And what made the *shift from I can't do this, to I can do this*? Can you remember and sort of sequences?

Elizabeth: Um, just things people said. Like my friends, especially (school-friend), would say: 'Yes you can, like *you're smarter than me, you can do it.*' and I'm like: 'No I can't' and *so I'd try it anyway, to see if I could*, could do it. And Mr B [teacher] he didn't come out and say, like you can do it, he just said: '*There's some people in this class*' and he'd look around and *he'd look at me*, and he'd go '*who can do better*' and like: 'Oh, he's looking at me'. And so that kind of like boosted me up, I reckon. When mum talked, she said like: '*You can do it, cause [your sister] used to do that too. She used to be really good at science. She used to be like 'A's and everything and she'd say: "Oh, I can't do it" like this*'. (Yep.) Like she was worse than me but I do exactly the same as her. (Yeah.) And so I think that kind of boosts me as well... Yeah. I shocked myself.... So that's when science started to come in all right for me. (Elizabeth 2, 1012:1073)

For Elizabeth, a combination of new resources bring about significant change. Friend and teacher re-define, Mum thickens the stories and adds context, and school marks provide a reality-check. But it is not just things people said. Elizabeth's friend is there in her new class with her. Her teacher makes clear the way ahead. Both goals and means are available.

Like continuities, changes are often made up of the little things that add up to mean a lot. Change is contingent upon *enough* resource shift. Enough is contingent upon the way that any new losses or potential gains are engaged with by the individual concerned, and upon the other resources-at-hand that they can draw upon to do this. These in turn are contingent upon biographical and cultural history.

*Anything can happen but it usually doesn't*

Many of the continuities in young people's lives are made of such moments, moments where if individuals had been resourced enough they may well have been able to make significant changes or engage in different kinds of negotiations. Stories of change (eg. Beth, who moved out of a violent home and learned to tell her story) are evidence that this can happen.

What was going on in Elizabeth's story (above) is a kind of polyphonic (multi-voiced) or surround-sound re-definition of her. The more isolated a new resource flow, the more tenuous it is. (NB. re. workers with youth - this is why *it is important to work with kids in their social context - not just in their heads*).

Isolated, counter-contextual or counter-cultural resource flows can make new fragile links. Newly introduced resources can be rendered useless, unless consolidated by other resources (practical, symbolic or resources of practice). Through some consistent community mentoring, Brett became a sailing champion. Later though, his new links to the sailing world were severed when he simply could not get up to the city to sail. Likewise, the nearly possible option of year 11 becomes quite impossible when peers are absent, classes are meaningless, and bus-rides are long and lonely.

Apparently, despite all odds, some tenuous links are being thickened with time, made robust through other complementary flows and through the individual's own practices of engagement. Noah continuing school is a good example of this. Between the school-class's 'cluster-movement' to college, the shared bus trip, the fact that this year many peers stayed on, the relevant, safe, and *do-able* automotive subject (coupled with his passion for working on cars), and the made-safe exposure to city employers through work-experience programs, there must have been just *enough* safe and relevant connections to see him through year 12. His story flies in the face of many others who simply have not continued.

It would be impossible to catalogue external causes of such change using objective research methods or independent variables. The interpretive tradition pursues a line of enquiry based on the idea that although 'things' have 'causes', people have 'reasons' (Minichiello et al. 1995). Noah's reasons, in our 3<sup>rd</sup> interview (3:1) encompass all of the principles of resource flows explored above (but in his usual understated way). He would still prefer a job in The Valley but school is 'Ok' ('it got better'): his friends were there, the automotive course was 'good' and regarding work experience?: 'I reckon I could go back there'.

## Implications

This chapter has explored the ways in which resources become available to young people. This is essentially about individuals' different life-chances. In the context of different social constraints, young people's available resources represent their opportunities to socially engage, to creatively negotiate and even to transcend the day-to-day circumstances (or not) in which they find themselves.

Throughout the chapter, respondents' stories show that although there are different types of resources, these are becoming available to individuals in very similar ways – specifically through social relationships of trust (with individuals, groups, and / or institutions). History (both individual and group) plays a huge role in the shape of such relationships. Families are particularly significant others in these resource flows, and how they equip their kids makes all the difference in terms of how their kids are able to access other sources (eg. school, peer, community, media input), and make use of other resources. However, it is also clear that families, themselves, are differently resourced – again based upon their own trust relationships, which are themselves the result of history.

The individuals in this study have unique lives and stories, but they are also very clearly patterned. Respondents' stories show that resource flows are gendered; the things that women share with each other and access from each other are usually quite different to the resources that Geeveston's young men can access. More profoundly, though, *the different resource flows explored in this chapter* (especially within families) *are the embodiment of class*, that is, the different things that people *do* with resources and relationships.

None of this – the documenting of patterns - is to deny the possibility of change within individual lives or group circumstances, but there are also very clear patterns in how changes are happening, and how they are not.

The major contribution of this chapter is not just in the way it shows how social patterns of inequality are daily negotiated and replicated, but also how these young people's lives are being changed. If we are interested in the circumstances of marginalized groups, improving young people's life-chances, and /or social change

towards a more fair and equitable society, then stories of change can also be read as stories of hope. Research that helps us to understand structure and process is absolutely necessary for informed action, and so understanding how patterns continue and changes are happening (the process, the elements of the process) is crucial. In the context of this challenge, chapter 9 will explore the implications of this research.

## 9. *Theory and research as grounded social practice*

When I started out as a PhD candidate, a great deal of effort went into understanding and maintaining some binary conceptual categories. These include: What is theory? What is research? What are the distinctions between doing youth-work with young people and doing research fieldwork with young people? I knew then that it was important to break from *doing* things with young people and their communities in order to claim some space to *think* about what I was seeing, and to put a language around it that made more sense. However, a significant part of doing a project of this type – of ‘growing up’ into being a sociologist – has been a growing awareness of the integrity of the whole, and the interrelatedness of all of these levels of engagement. To be effective, work with young people at a community level needs to be based upon coherent sets of assumptions and theoretical frameworks, about such things as what is happening to our communities, to rural Australia, the phenomenon of ‘youth’, and the kinds of transitions that are happening. If it is going to be well-targeted, community-work also needs to be based upon grounded research. Research is greatly enriched in a dialogue with sociological theory, and our theoretical frameworks and assumptions constantly need to be grounded and challenged by the stories of real people. Each of these kinds of involvement actually requires and informs the others.

Conceptual models that have been useful for thinking about the research process have been about ‘praxis’, or thinking and action (Freire 1973), and the ‘hermeneutic spiral’, or doing and then better understanding (Heidegger 1962). For me, the lived experience, and the most useful image, is one of *spiralling* inwards and outwards: between research and practice; between engagement in the world of people’s issues and engagement in the world of ideas of the discipline; between inspired thought and creative action; between the conceptual frameworks offered by the discipline and the things that only real lives can teach.

This chapter presents an exploration of the spiral, and it is based around discoveries from the *doing* of this research. Firstly, I present a brief overview of research findings and contributions. Secondly, the discoveries made are a direct reflection of the kinds of research methods used, and so I will explore discoveries relating to the



research process itself. Thirdly, I will argue that good research is about establishing a creative dialogue between the world of ideas available to us (the theory) and real people's lives and stories. I will explore some of the issues of involving young people in this kind of dialogue. Fourthly, useful practice is informed both by good models of understanding, and by grounded research. Respondents' stories highlight the challenges that they face and their own ways of creatively responding, but also some 'methodologies of hope' for those who would work alongside them. Finally, the chapter concludes with some learnings, reflections and unanswered questions about the social process of doing good research.

### **Finding a way in / finding a way out**

Although there is a lot of published information about broader social conditions, to date there has been very little information available about how young people are creatively making lives within situations that they find themselves. This has been one such study. I followed the trajectories and stories of 32 young people from a rural town, making a life over 5 years. I defined making a life in terms of establishing livelihood, meaning, social connectedness. The empirical focus of the study was upon trajectory and meaning, ie. what individuals were doing, where they were going, and the sense that they were able to make of it all.

My work has looked at how young people are differently making a life in the midst of social conditions that are not optimal. Earlier, through the literature, I highlighted some issues that are common to young people growing up in Australian communities, but exacerbated by rurality. These included the effects of changes in world economies on local economies, their impact on patterns of labour and industry, and also the collapse of the youth job market. In a climate of economic rationalism we can see that rural communities are, at this time, left in a quite diminished position to resource their young in terms of livelihoods, and in terms of other social connections and stories about the future in which they can believe. Because of social inequalities - issues of class, gender and race - some are being affected by these social changes far more than others. Through the thesis, I have explored how these things shape the lives and lived experience of the young people in Geeveston.

In order to make any sense of young people's complex lives, listening to their stories is essential. The conceptual frameworks that we use when talking *about* them often bear little relation to their lived experiences, and can be fairly thin descriptions (in an ethnographic sense). On the basis of their stories I have shared some thick descriptions about the process of making a life: about their transitions; about youth agency and social structure; about young people's own strategies, negotiations and engagements; about the social processes that see young people's life-chances structured so differently from each other; about the resources available to young people as they make a life; and about how they are differently accessing these.

A model of 4 different cultural orientations has been central to this study. It emerged from our early conversations and formed an interpretive framework for the whole research project. I used this figure to describe and explain the effects of local history and culture on the different ways that young people were making a life. The inherent patterns were profoundly classed and gendered (refer back to chapter 4). This same model became a way to explore a multitude of issues (listed above) in a processual way.

To sum up the findings of the thesis in only one paragraph would look something like this: Geeveston's young people are making their lives differently from each other because they can access very different resources. Their practices of storying are centrally implicated because it is their stories that turn past exposures into future possibilities. The resources that respondents access are of different types: practical resources; resources of symbol and meaning; resources of habit and practice. All different types of resources become available to individuals in the same way – always through relationships of trust (with self, other individuals, with groups, with institutions). These relationships are a result of biographical and group history, so the individuals in the study are situated very differently in terms of the things that they can access in the process of making a life. Patterns of resource flows within these trust relationships strongly reflect local history, gender, and particularly class. In grounded terms, kids are able to make quite different lives because of the things that they can access through their networks, and their networks' own networks. It is these things that make up social structure. Individual agency, then, also needs to be understood in terms of these relationships and these resource flows.

In addition to the contributions of this research discussed so far, the findings of this study were closely related to the methods used. Many of the understandings developed were a direct result of the research processes, and this raised issues of how we do good research with young people. I will elaborate here on some of the issues involved in doing this research, and on some lessons learned in the process.

### **Research procedures / social process**

Doing good qualitative research is not about procedures; it is about social relationships. During the project I learned that issues of social process, for example negotiations and alliances, meaning and engagement, trust and resource flows, are not just central to research findings but also to the research process itself.

Discoveries are about listening and watching; insight is about asking and taking the time to understand. Continued access to people's lives, in order to do any of these things, is always about trust. Trust comes from communicating well and being trustworthy. Access to respondents, their stories, and to rich data are intrinsically bound up in the nature of relationships formed in the field. These relationships are forged through sensitivity in negotiations and face-to-face encounters. Equally significantly, though, they are about trying to understand well, being respectful of respondents' voices, striving to do some sort of justice to complex issues, and caring about how individuals and their stories are being represented.

To be an interviewer is hard work, but to be interviewed is to be vulnerable. In some cases I am asking a young person to do a thing that they have learned, for 15 years, not to do - put themselves out there, to be exposed. At the outset, we needed to negotiate together ways that they could do this without endangering their sense of well-being.

Some approaches that worked well with uneasy respondents were also ones that redistributed power within the relationship. These included interviewing in pairs (far more culturally appropriate for at least four of the girls, who would typically do their thinking out-loud and corporately), and also interviewing on the institution's time. Non-academic students were interviewed at school during maths period, or when not on a break at work (with teacher / boss cooperation of course). This seems to change the power dynamics - even with all parties being aware of what was happening. It

re-positions the interviewer (me) as ally beside them (respondent) as they reclaim some power over their time - outside the routines of the institution. Todd would not go back to work. When I suggested it he just grinned and kept talking (and he is a man of few words). When I suggested that Ellen go back in, she decided that there was another story that she had to tell me. It really helped that the work-supervisors and teachers approached were sympathetic to research aims (unlike other communities - see Measor 1985).

Some respondents needed to spend time doing things together with me (ie. not sitting down and looking at each other - this is one distinct cultural way of operating that does not work well with these people). Particularly with males there is a lot to be said for side-by-side 'walking-talking' or 'working-talking' rather than 'eyeball-to-eyeball-talking'. For other respondents, questioning me, and getting a clearer picture of my interests and agendas, was important:

How would I go about getting your job? (Sarah 3:20)

For another respondent, role-play was in order:

I'll do your job, and you can be me! (Kylie 3:11)

Each of these things is about establishing trust. In the field it seems that the researcher's job is to fit in with / facilitate whatever respondents need to do to feel comfortable telling their story. Accordingly we conducted interviews at home, at work, at sophisticated coffee shops sipping lattes, school, college, in malls, driving, on the phone, or lugging rocks together, in parks with the dog, and alone or with siblings, parents, or friends present.

Goffman (1959) uses a 'dramaturgical' approach to describe the ways in which individuals manage identities and encounters: 'backstage' are the things that remain hidden; 'frontstage' is the public performance. It was sometimes inevitable, and often quite useful, to let respondents see my own humanity and the chaos of the research process - to have some backstage activity spill into the encounter. This

diffused power issues, created humour and even fostered respondents' ownership of the whole project (for example Sonia explained to the tape recorder about the things it had missed when Ani messed up the recording).

Within interviews, tape recorders became useful as *explicit power-sharing devices*: 'The off-switch is *here*, in case you want to say something that you don't want on the record.' At other times, the (elsewhere expounded) 'switch off' effect (Measor 1985) meant that respondents (and particularly their parents) would share inside stories when the official interview was over. Sometimes, where reading transcripts was going to be an issue (eg. poor literacy, ADHD), we would listen to the respondent's tapes instead. In other situations, tapes set up a kind of playful reflexivity during interviews; one respondent (not middle class, not 'exploring') enjoyed listening to what she had just said and commenting on it further.

Even for confident respondents, to be interviewed is a strange experience (see Measor 1985). So much depends upon establishing safety *early* for this fairly unusual exchange. This entailed negotiating differently with different respondents.

The issue of informed consent was very much about negotiated realities. Good communication is so important, eg. 'Yes' so easily becomes 'No' if a question about being interviewed is framed disrespectfully or timed wrongly. Whether individuals do want to / do not want to be interviewed is a very fine line, especially at first. The meaning of the 'ask' is being constructed as we negotiate. Once individuals have named a position, they are committed, and to pursue would be to pester. A checklist was important:

- Are there ways for them to say 'yes' or 'no' honourably in this conversation?
- If I ask them here and now, am I making light of my promise of anonymity?
- Am I cornering them (eg. behind a cash-register where they have to be polite)?
- Will they be playing to an audience if I talk to them now?

Especially in early days, access depends upon relating well with parents and institutions as much as it does with the respondents themselves. This creates tensions around protocols: how to do the right thing by parents while simultaneously getting the negotiations right with their kids? If going by formal rules, parental permission is primary, but that is particularly bad process with teenagers. Time-

delays between the initial conversations with potential respondents and their first interview can provide space for fear to build, and this is not helpful either.

The same applies with negotiations through schools and work-bosses. The last thing a researcher needs is to be seen by the young respondent to be colluding with parents / school / work in order to corner them.

With regard to these dilemmas, it has been important to negotiate differently with different families. What are their expectations, their needs for information, or reassurances required first? Can I get parents' consent over the phone immediately after the kid agrees, and can we deal with the form later? Once parents knew me and the project, and understood that I really wanted to hear their kids, there were few problems gaining access at that level. (Connell et. al. 1982 relate a similar experience).

Negotiations were hardest in early encounters. Issues of social structure and wider power relations had an impact upon relationships with families *even before we met*. In the early phase of my honours project (1995) I conducted some trial interviews in Taroona (middle class suburb). Parents were supportive, even sympathetic, so long as exam times were avoided. They framed their involvement as 'helping you out with your uni project' [Poor Dear]: 'What are you doing your thesis on?'. Early encounters with working-class Geeveston parents revealed something quite different. Paraphrased, initial responses were more like: 'Please don't hurt my kid'. It is wise to expect fear or hostility from those parents who are not familiar with social research or university. The researcher poses a threat and the onus is upon her to prove otherwise. That is gruelling but fair.

When Josh kept losing his consent-form, there was something else going on. Parents must sign consent-forms, but in some cases parents cannot read. It is important to be aware of that possibility and to sensitively negotiate through it.

It is in the early stages of research relationships that rapport, trust and mutual respect take shape, or not. Watching vocabulary was also important, and framing questions

in ways that were meaningful for respondents. I found that young people who are really powerless do not respond well when asked to do 'interviews' about 'choices' and 'futures':

'... I have to rethink my own vocabulary, when I talk to these people.

*Interview* is probably a hostile word...' (Research journal, April 1999)

... um, [also] I need to frame the question better, so I don't try to talk about choices to people who feel they have no choices...' (Research journal, April 1999)

In other studies researchers have found that: 'poor rural girls have little sense of a future, or of possibilities outside their present life' (Yates 1996:15). Seeking respondents' world-views sometimes entails keeping the conversation topics very grounded, framed by the things that they are used to talking about (eg. 'tell me about your new job' / 'tell me about Geeveston'). This is not disingenuous or unfocussed as all the significant research themes somehow become linked within their stories. We just have to find a safe way in.

'Rapport' could be defined in terms of resource flows between respondents and interviewers. Good rapport entails making full use of respondents' frames of reference, *their* language, *their* schemes and themes. This means listening well, so that the process becomes truly collaborative; rather than doing research *on* young people, it is about doing research *with* them on areas of mutual interest. When the research process is about collaborative discovery, it is rewarding for all parties.

This is not simply an ethical / ideological stand but also a pragmatic one. A meaningful interview for the respondent also means more rich data for the researcher. Respondents' engagement in, and commitment to, the research process makes a qualitative difference to the type of information shared.

A good qualitative interview releases the storyteller to do their work. The order in which questions and themes are introduced either facilitates this process or gets in the way. In early re-interviews, it got in the way. I had mistakenly been asking distant, demographic questions first, and logically working up to things of trust and

substance. It was, in fact, a much better process to let respondents' *own* passions frame the interview from the start. (This is harder with those who share few real-world-passions, but more on this later). The first few questions actually establish frames of reference for the rest of the interview, as well as *lasting roles* and *power dynamics* (interrogator / subject or collaborative explorers). Consequently the best interviews began with very open questions like: 'So what is it that you really want to do?'; or 'What happened?'. The differences in topics covered also became a source of good data. Meanwhile, both the themes behind the interview and the more closed demographic questions were easily addressed by their stories, and in the dialogue that followed.

In completing this thesis, I have been in two minds about whether to describe this as 'collaborative' or 'participatory' research. The description 'collaborative' down-plays the extent to which I set the agenda. Calling it 'participatory', on the other hand, down-plays or sells short the extent to which respondents' own stories and passions shape the content of what we discuss and how we discuss it. I am distinguished from respondents by role, age and often class and gender. Perhaps the word collaborative should perhaps be reserved for such 'equal' partnerships? On the other hand, we sell young people short if we over-emphasise power differences in our dealings with them. As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, I am not the only one with power in this research situation - power is diffuse, multi-centred, and operates in complex ways between us. I strongly believe that without the collaboration (not just co-operation) of most of the respondents, most of the time, this study of young people's lives would actually not be what it is. It was at the point where respondents actually became researchers of their own lives, that some of the richest insights emerged. At its best points, the research *was* collaborative, while at its most violent points it fell well short of this ideal (more on this later in the chapter). All things considered, I think perhaps the *ideal* of 'collaboration' is appropriate, although the use of the word also needs to be tempered with an understanding that this is not action research – as *I* approached *them* to be involved the research, I mostly asked the questions and they mostly answered.

Other researchers (Measor 1985; Connell et al. 1982) suggest that the richness of the data from any interview is a function of the quality of relationships and the *time invested beforehand*. Within this study, doing longitudinal research has been



essential to the kinds of insights gained. Time invested in relationships within the field grows exponentially in returns. The earliest and most stressful investments are met with small rewards. As trust grows both ways (see Wax 1971), fieldwork becomes much less uncomfortable. Alongside depth of rapport with respondents, and thickness around their stories, time (over years) and trust-worthiness return an abundance of new encounters and new stories.

‘So you’re the one who’s doing that study. How’s it going?’

(Conversation with a worker, fieldnotes, April 1999)

I wish that I was sticking around for a couple of years now, because people have got a story of what I’m doing and they validate it and just volunteer information all over the place... It’s just starting to get really good. (Researcher journal, April 1999).

By 1999 I had been around Geeveston, on and off, for 7 years.

‘I think I only really arrived in the last 12 months. No, I’m not a local or an insider, but something has just shifted’. (Researcher journal, April

1999)

That was the year when the school asked for help with a submission for funding, when those who had been involved in the research wanted to hear what I had found out, and when other parents started spontaneously telling stories of ‘how the kids are doing’. A young man hailed me down at the service station in Geeveston, leaned on the car and playfully hassled: ‘you never interviewed me!’ (Fieldnotes, May 1999). Other young people in the school were regularly asking: ‘When’s *my* turn?’. Although recruiting new panel members was not an option, these individuals’ stories (either taped, or reconstructed on tape in the car on the way home) really add to the richness of the whole study.

The previous chapter showed how trust (of people, places and projects) can be vicariously earned within groups. It seems that this applies to researchers as well - ‘trust by osmosis’. Credibility grows once some key, trusted locals are obviously

engaging with, and trusting me and the project. (I have also experienced this phenomenon after a similar number of years of doing youthwork in another community.)

This whole longitudinal effort began as an honours project that simply, opportunistically, kept going. Interestingly, in a recent interview (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1999) Michael Apted explained that his legendary '7-Up' documentary series started in the same way: 'the original program was only going to be one film'. Respondents in the Geeveston study were not expecting follow-up interviews the first time, nor the second, and each needed to be re-negotiated. The freshness of each interview became a distinct advantage. No-one was under obligation from earlier commitments, no-one lived their lives with the awareness of being continually watched by an interviewer, and re-negotiating each interview was always about establishing understandings and building trust. Also, I wonder who would have originally committed to such a long project - and whose stories would have been excluded from the start? (One guess is that nearly all respondents would have been middle-class and/or female, 'exploring' and 'wandering').

As it was, some respondents welcomed me back, one said she had forgotten what the project was about and who I was (others had vague recollections), and still other respondents negotiated their ways in and out of the research as they felt able. This was stressful at the time. How to conduct valid panel-research when the panel keep doing erratic things? However, these fieldwork dynamics also led to some of the clearest insights (eg. crisis as loss of story, crisis as generalized mistrust, often including mistrust of own stories, crisis and loss of voice). Over the years the project only lost four respondents, and also gained communication with one who had not wanted to talk much earlier. Respondents' comings and goings provide rich data about practices, particularly if respondents can explain them later.

Returning again and again, before (early high school) during (the moment of leaving grade 10) and after, meant firstly corroboration of stories, hearing multiple accounts of the same thing (good for thick description), and being able to follow some continuities and changes in stories and trajectories. It meant hearing multiple accounts about shared as well as individual lived experience. These young people are not simply respondents, but expert *insider-informants* on group and cultural

processes. Returning also meant having access to older, forgotten stories and understandings, which could be re-visited with respondents. All of these are things that would have been missed in one-off interviews.

Thoroughly knowing respondents' earlier stories was an advantage. I had hoped to study respondents' old interview transcripts immediately before their next interview. Sheer busyness in the field meant that it did not always happen.

Reading transcripts together (not literally reading whole transcripts together, but dipping in and out) was also very useful. These became tools for validation, clearing misconceptions, digging deeper, documenting change, and reflecting. Storying is a collaborative process; stories are enriched in dialogue. Researcher reflections on respondents' stories, my re-framing of what they have said or taught, the bringing back of first-order constructs each can trigger new, even richer descriptions from respondents.

Returning again and again also meant being able to better understand local dynamics and to target new questions well. Depth in the data collected is the result of an iterative or recursive interviewing process (see chapter 3). On transcripts, I wrote codes insisting: 'must ask them about this next time'.

As well as seeing further instances of familiar patterns, the recursive interviewing style meant going back and interrogating the gaps and surprises in the data. It meant not burying and hiding anomalies (because they threaten to mess up neat theories) but digging them out for further inspection. It meant elaborating the conditions under which different things occur. When Mark got his secure job immediately after finishing grade 10, that did not seem to fit the model at all. He had no clear story of what he was going to do; he was not being pro-active. I returned to the field, to the negative case: 'What happened?' 'How did it happen?'. 'Negotiation by proxy' was the resulting discovery - a new idea that was then corroborated by others' stories. (Families' networks regularly secure local young men their manual jobs - and *they* bear the onus and feel the moral responsibility for that process.)

Longitudinal research is good for getting inside social process. It offers (jerky) 'film' rather than a 'snapshot'. The panel is a useful way of observing contrasts in

context, in young people's negotiations and engagements, and their accounts of lived experience. It also reveals commonalities in these things (eg: different resources, but similar patterns of flow; the role of trust relationships).

A community-based-study leads to insights about young people's negotiations and practices of engagement *in context* (eg. kids networks and their networks' networks). Interviews with other sources (eg. parents, school staff, community members) and observations meant triangulation of data, but also a multi-voiced account, a thicker description of social life in Geeveston. Stories were often conflicting, reflecting different life-worlds in all their complications. I would hear about a different community, depending upon who was being interviewed. Cultural orientations - 'exploring', 'settling', 'wandering' and 'retreating' - became useful frames for working with these different voices.

In terms of making sense of the world in which I found myself, the tape recorder was very useful. While I was exiled for a time away from the uni and the academic community, the tape recorder became the significant 'interested other'. (This other is useful in a qualified way; unlike social others, tape recorders are no good for reality-checks and contribute nothing themselves to thicken stories.) Storying into the tape recorder was about finding patterns, making things meaningful and creating trust in my own judgements. It was essential for dumping - for researcher debriefing. Raw, poignant and emotionally charged ramblings after interviews (and negotiations) formed an instant fieldwork journal, rich with insights about interactions, significant stories, and with ethnographic detail. Later, theoretical insights would come, but these are also the kinds of grounded data (and emotional links back to the field - which keep the process of writing-up interesting) that would have faded fast without a record.

Fieldwork also involves a *steep* learning curve. The process of debriefing-on-the-run was invaluable for learning fast. That is: doing; speaking it; grumbling about what went wrong; reflecting; realization; discovering some patterns; storying how it might work differently next time. Without this, much would slip past in the fluster, and I am a slow learner under those conditions. I could not afford to be.

Disciplined practices were important: recording things as closely as possible to what was perceived; then musings; then multi-levelled interpretations of what was *really* going on in that interaction; then other links and patterns emerging - strictly in *that* order. There is no going backwards. These formed the start of an analytic file.

Words carry multiple messages and incomplete stories. Where I was alert enough to query these *during* interviews, the data was much richer. As well as being rich documents, transcripts also remain as testaments to missed opportunities or the moments when researcher concentration lapsed. Two in-depth interviews per day is quite enough.

*To do good research many layers of interpretation are required.* To take spoken words at face-value is to be as naïve as to take no notice of them at all. It is to miss the complexity and context of the encounter. Multiple interviews from the same individuals often mean conflicting stories of the same topic.

In some cases, respondents lie. Ellen in her second interview says: 'You know, we told you so much stuff, and half of it wasn't even true!' (Ellen 3:2). Researcher 'stance' somehow needs to encompass both trust and cunning. For alternative views on this topic, see Douglas (1976:55) or Wax (1971:372). As the old adage says: 'Be as cunning as serpents and as gentle as doves'. At the very least, what is required is an awareness that stories and realities are complex. Beyond the search for real 'facts, events, feelings or meanings' (Silverman 2000), respondents stories can be read as 'cultural texts' differently constructed by individuals to create understandings, using available cultural resources.

There are multiple layers of things going on in each social encounter, and multiple stories that can be drawn out of each. The following transaction is like many: 'just like a duck – with all the activity going on beneath the surface of the water.' (Researcher journal, September 1998). Sometimes there are not many words to work with, but lots else going on. Both getting along with people and making sense of social life is heavily reliant on unconfirmed hunches:

Find Mum watching soapies.

Call to her through screen door.

She glowers at me off the couch (Is she not going to move?).

I chatter her to the door, explain, permission to talk to Noah again if he wants to, explain (too abstract, back off Ani).

'Yeah well.' she says (she's cooperative but I think she's cynical).

'I hear Dimmi got a good job since we last spoke' (Remember we spoke before, I remember your kid's name and story, I think you're doing OK, Mum).

'Noah's at school - think he went there 'cos all his mates did'

(explanation of why it is hard to find him, apology for him even being there, makes no sense to their family...?)

I'm pretty sure she can't read, I explain in an offhand way what the form says - gesture specifically at the right spot. She signs nonchalantly as I make relevant small-talk, mention my book (concrete handle on what I'm doing again).

'Are you still working on that book are you? When do you reckon you'll finish?' (What does this mean when she asks this? Small-talk, generous reciprocal interest, or when are you going to stop bugging us? All of the above?)

'By February or the Uni will kill me (make a face)'. A chance to show my own fragility. Chance to laugh, we both laugh.

She hands back the form. (Fieldnotes: September 1998)

Most of the information is gleaned as hunches, sub-texts, (with or without text) and needs to be treated as such until further notice. We cannot get inside another's head (Weber 1969). But correction or validation is often forthcoming, and would be completely overlooked, had not some attention already been paid to possible sub-texts.

There were gendered patterns in the types of data available to work with. It was harder to get inside what young men are actually doing, in particular their negotiation strategies. There could be at least three reasons for this. Firstly, the volume of recognisable data is smaller - in interviews, young men are apt to provide shorter answers. While the typical female transcript is 40-60 pages long (narrow column, double-spaced), for males it just as likely to be 20-30. Secondly, they are usually willing to donate far less time in interviews to self-analysis, and to the analysis of

their own negotiation strategies. In most cases this kind of practice does not seem to come easily, nor is it engaging. (The clear exceptions to both of these points are 3 young men who spend a lot of time consolidating their stories with their mothers). Other research has found the same, suggesting that our conversation-style interviews may be a more woman-friendly medium (eg. see Measor 1985). Thirdly, though, as I was a woman researcher, a certain rapport was there with the young women and other things will probably remain secret men's business. What different stories would our encounters have led to, had I been male?

Upon reflection, I feel that other issues should be raised because of 'rapport' with young women in the field. Part of that same rapport was young women's propensity to 'suss' when their listener was responding well, as they talked. Other researchers have written about how discursive practices in the field, just as in everyday life, construct identities (McLeod 2000). Also in the field, these same researchers suspect that young women respondents gave them the answers that they thought they wanted to hear (see Yates 1996). In this research, I am aware that our encounters shaped the types of stories that were told, and also the types of stories that could be told. In collecting and analysing data, all I could do was be sensitive to the dynamics – both teller and active listener become co-creators of the story. This also adds a layer to the earlier analysis of storying, and points again to the significance of the different types of forums (eg. family, peers, one isolated friend) in which different young people are able to story their lives.

Trust relationships are not only significant in the field but well beyond it – into data analysis and writing. There are some significant issues attached to working with respondents' stories and voices.

While to the researcher, this is a project (and a passion), to those being researched, this is their lives under scrutiny. There are implications for how stories are written, firstly doing justice to stories shared, by presenting them in all their complexity, thick with context, and secondly, respecting respondent anonymity. These two interests clash regularly. It was important to protect the anonymity of respondents as had been promised; they are too easy to recognise in a small community. Some respondents have been written-up as two people, specifically to separate sensitive material from their other more recognisable stories. It is difficult to change minor

details of a story without significantly altering its shape. Even a change of occupation mangles some of the best quotes. Meanwhile, I discovered that changed names had to fit respondents' characters, or their stories simply would not write properly. Although splitting characters comes easily, blending characters is actually impossible while holding their significant stories intact. After a couple of attempts I refrained from doing that.

How dare I / can I / will I write this thing? The main dilemma has been about privileges of access, and doing justice to the stories and lives shared:

The feeling I get after conducting that interview, the phone one, is, a real hollowness. It's like I've, I have touched a sore spot and I've allowed her to pour out everything that's painful, and, I have nothing to offer her. She - she was very generous, they're generous with their pain, the people who talk, and generous with, with their lives, and I have only ears to offer them. I don't know what comfort that is, um, I don't know whether she gets anything out of it or whether she's just a - a truly generous being (Sigh). I'm thankful but I feel like I've been in a space where I shouldn't have been. Probably, ethically there's no reason why I shouldn't have been, but (pause) in a soul way, you know, in a human spirit way, I've been some where that I had no right to be and I should feel very thankful for being there - for the ability to be able to be there - or for the grace for allowing me to be there. (Pause.) Um I keep thinking the word dirty but its not dirty. (Voice is raised now.) I feel way too privileged to hear this stuff and just write it down, um, in an academic way - it's got real people in it, and blood and tears and (laugh) fear, and skin and lives. (Silence.) I'm going to have some lunch (is mumbling now). I feel flat. (Taped researcher diary, May 1999).

Respondents' trust and generosity means a responsibility for writing their stories well. More often than not in the first 3 years, this was paralyzing. Regularly breaking through this paralysis relied on drawings, stories, poems - my journal tapes even have songs on them. In many instances to write anything in a linear form, or to make diagrams felt dangerously like making caricatures of people and issues that are,



in reality, so much more complex. A full set of tapes (minus 2, see chapter 3) has been very valuable, constantly bringing the respondents' voices back into the writing.

Another issue was the integrity of stories. When people are hearing about this project for the first time, 'returning to the same kids over years... making a life...' they often say: 'Like a miniature 7-Up?'. However, something different happens to respondents' stories when they are presented thematically, and it is not like '7-Up' (Apted 1998) at all. In this study, the writer's voice is loudest and the individuals' lives are fragmented into themes - they cannot properly be traced. This touches on significant issues and debates about what researchers actually do with people's stories (eg. see Fine 1992; Richardson 1992; Hood et al. 1999). In their recent book about 'streetkids' voices, Cullen and Marshall (1999) present this challenge:

It wasn't our intention to impose any hierarchy or structure on interviews... All we've changed is the interviewee's name... We've been sensitive to the danger involved in putting the book forward as yet another academic study by researchers who seem to know best about everyone else's life, especially disadvantaged people's life. (viii-ix)

Here researchers really enter a world of clashing ideals. How we analyse is important and even to analyse *at all* is contentious.

The form of research will depend upon the purpose for which it is conducted (Yates 1996). I analyse the way that I do because I want to understand and put a language around some all-too-familiar social processes. I want grounded understandings to inform my own practice with young people. A critical look at structure and process may sometimes involve going places where not everyone will follow. Does that necessarily mean not going there? I think not.

My breaking-up of respondents' stories into themes is about this, and it also respects respondents' privacy. In a small town, people are too easy to trace, and fragmented narratives is ironically one of the better protections that I can offer. In an attempt to keep the integrity of stories, extended quotes and abundant information about context was included.

Alongside the issue of working with respondents' stories and voices, sits the issue of *working with their silences*.

Practices of storying are intertwined with rapport, habit, culture. Within the research (like within kids' lives), these things form loops which are self-perpetuating. If a respondent is used to self-contained storying (as compared to more collective storying), our rapport is generally stronger... so more rewarding storying exchanges follow. The converse is also true. Some interviews are long, fluent and generously worded there is plenty of text there to analyse. But some are very truncated, for example, one mostly consisting of the phrase: 'I don't know'. There is no less going on here. I suspect that often the kids with least to say have the most to teach us.

It is hard to analyse silence and to do it ethically and respectfully. How dare I put words into her mouth? I cannot. But I can write, albeit very carefully. I can talk about patterns of practice that I see (eg. nonverbals). I can talk about contextual factors that may have contributed to this silence (more on the politics of this later). Research is always a little inconclusive. I can write my hunches about why, as long as they are framed as such, but I can not know. Does she even know? If knowing is about coherent stories, probably not.

I have found some good insights from analyzing muted conversations. Hunches frame good future questions, if our verbal dialogue ever gets that far, and occasionally it does. With Elizabeth, and also with Beth, I had a chance to go back two years later and ask each what had been happening for them around the time of their first interview. Each explained the crisis that she had been experiencing, but there was no way that she could have verbalized that at the earlier interview. For them, as they explained later, a lack of language about what was happening was a significant part of the problem that they were experiencing.

If we are prepared to sit with it, *the ways that kids do not talk to us can be as informative as the ways that they do*.

Another result of getting close to important issues in people's lives was *anger*. I learned not to flee from others' outbursts; as long as they wanted to keep talking

(even heatedly) the channels of communication were open. The emotions were rarely directed at me but at the situation:

‘What is it you want? Why do you keep ringing us? Why do you want to talk to him about choices? Look, he *had* no choice! (Jenny 1999, 1)

Later that same hour Jenny said: ‘Sorry about that, I’m a bit under pressure at the moment.’ (regarding just getting-by). Her son Richard, who had bellowed ‘I’ve got nothing to say to you!’ (1:1), translates his own words 2 years later: ‘Right then I didn’t know what I was going to do.’ (Richard 3:1).

Where emotional outbursts had happened and communication had stayed open (where trust had been tested), I found greater permissions to go into secret places. Respondents’ generosity with their stories demonstrate trust, but in so doing they present new challenges:

I still feel really hollow. (Sigh) hollow like I (sigh) um offer them nothing but the chance to speak and that the speaking hurts them (silence). (Small voice) Still they choose to do it - what do these people get out of being interviewed? (Researcher journal, April 1999)

Sometimes, researcher discomfort clashes with convictions that this is worth doing. There is a fine line between providing forums for others’ voices and being a voyeur - especially with those who are being and / or feeling oppressed. I observed the need to keep at bay a kind of journalistic ‘vulture’ instinct. I learned to recognize and celebrate when individuals claim their *power to not speak* but also when they *claim their power to speak*.

Out of these things comes a recognition that power is not static but complex and multi-dimensional, and that the agency of the researched should not be overlooked (see Bowes 1996; Long and Long 1992). Much as the researcher position is a powerful one (ie. in relation to ‘voice’ and publishing), there are different ebbs and flows of power here, and different currents operating at once. The young respondents have definitely been exercising their agency in this research process. Within their choices to be involved or not, when to be involved, to tell or not, how to

tell the story, and how far they let me in, they are exercising considerable power. The wholeness of the story I tell is dependent upon being able to hear their stories. But the wholeness of this story also depends upon their ability to speak.

Sitting with respondents' stories for several years has meant slowly and cumulatively finding a language that made sense of the data. My most significant finding (and biggest nightmare at the time) was *how much data young people's stories actually carried about cultural and social processes*. Every statement says something about available resources and relationships. The volume of data was overwhelming, everything was relevant, and it took literally years to sort it out under appropriate themes. The clear message here, though, is to never just superficially read young people's stories. They have far more to teach us than we may expect.

### **Method and sociological insight**

When they tell their stories, young people can teach us a lot. As well as telling us about their own agency, their stories can speak directly into our understandings of social structure and social process. If we listen well we will find our own thin stories becoming thicker descriptions. Within the pages of this thesis, in effect what I have been striving to do is to create a space of respectful dialogue between individuals' lives and sociological theory. I have discovered that creating safe spaces for that dialogue is important. It also needs to be done carefully, and there are some caveats that come from this work that I will explore below.

Listeners to young people's stories can expect to find many layers of meaning. Beyond things explicitly spoken (eg. passions, aspirations) are things implicitly spoken or unspoken. These take different forms: things communicated as bi-lines to other stories (eg. list of resources, sources, common processes of resource flows) the unspoken but practiced (eg. 'do things' or 'sorting it'); and finally the unspoken and equally significant (eg. reading the silences with 'retreating' young women). These more subliminal levels become particularly important for understanding, social difference, social structure, and social process. We are the poorer if we do not spend the time to go there.

Within the process of this dialogue, both respondents and researcher have had to wrestle with some *big questions*.

Good research is based upon trust relationships and it needs to be meaningful for respondents. If research ever becomes a violation, respondents close down. Violations potentially happen when a respondent is betrayed, is not well heard, is made very uncomfortable or is made wrong. Making research meaningful is easy with some, and likewise creating basic trust. These are the respondents: who are used to having others ask for and listen to their stories; for whom 'past, future and me' are already clearly storied; and for whom what we were doing was already core business.

Other respondents, though, both face and present more challenges. How to frame question for (especially male 'settling') concrete thinkers? What are the best ways to ground conversations so that concrete thinkers can engage with the subject matter, but at the same time not limit the scope of their stories (not limit the interview to certain pre-concieved practical subjects)?

Sometimes there is a fine line between bringing normally unspoken things to consciousness, and making respondents either wrong (eg. 'I've never thought about that') or very uncomfortable. Do questions need to be changed in order not make respondents wrong? What then about consciousness-raising? What of the ethics of consciousness raising? The assumptions behind it? (Is it a kind of middle class cultural imperialism?). For 'settling' respondents, the research process is interesting if culturally unusual and amusing/bemusing. It may well be useful for them to think about options out loud before circumstances change around them (eg. local jobs disappear).

Meanwhile, the question lingers - how to talk futures with young people with whom futures are bleak? If we do not try, we will hear very limited types of stories about lived experience. How are we to do research with those who are already violated and closed down? Is it possible? Is it ethical to try? It seems that for some to speculate about the future is not at all rewarding, and to talk about past is like ripping the scab off a wound.

During interviews I found a meeting place with some of the walking wounded, and their insights are some of the most profound for research (eg. the lived experience of being within and / or emerging from crisis). Some say explicitly that the research process was useful in terms of their own storying (more on this later). Together, these things *present enough impetus to keep wrestling with these big questions*.

There are other hard issues to wrestle with. Something distasteful happens if individuals' stories become simply examples of social and cultural theories. Young people are not just repositories of social process and group cultures. As one respondent proclaims in her grade 7 essay: 'I'm an *indivigual*' (Phoebe 1:1995). As well as recognising how individuals share qualities with others, it is important to also show some respect for each's particular and unique story (see also Massey 1994).

There is also something ugly about taking another's story and working it to the point where they may not recognise it any more (Watts 1993). To do this represents a kind of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This presents a dilemma, because concepts like 'class', 'gender', 'globalization', and 'rural decline' clearly have a significant role to play in the analysis of these young people's stories. Respondents actually know all too well the limitations that are imposed on their own lives and the lives of loved ones. Examples from their stories include: How other families (not theirs) 'run' the town; not being able to get a local mechanic's job as a girl; Dad's job disappearing; and not having enough people to be able to make up a local football team any more. They simply say things in fresh ways and in terms of lived experience, and usually framed as troubles for private individuals and not major issues for publics (see Mills 1959:7).

The real injustice would come from not representing respondents' understandings well, and not *being open to learn from the stories that they bring*. To simply use individuals' stories as exemplars of some theory that we already knew is abhorrent. That is no dialogue, it is a tirade. In every chapter I have tried to establish a dialogue between respondents and researcher, between their stories (as I hear them) and broader theories.

I would like to extend this dialogue further (I think).

Not surprisingly, these methodological/political issues seem not to bother respondents so much. Some are, however, interested in how the things that they (personally) said are being used, and so in later interviews we re-checked the themes that arose from their input (NB. this also accords with a grounded theory approach). First-order constructs met their approval (or not) and were shaped accordingly. At that stage, writing was not at a point where I could show them their quotes enmeshed in other text. That would have been interesting. If I had another set of interviews now, this may be where I would invest it - bringing back some cameo completed passages of text, documenting their responses to and dialogue with these things. There are researcher ideals, and then there are real-world constraints.

If I am honest, I am actually writing some things that I would not wish some respondents to understand - the social-systemic picture regarding life-chances and opportunities can be really nasty. Also, as we burrowed deeper into text and abstraction and layers of analysis, some would be excluded from engaging even more so than before. And to insist upon going there would culturally be violent.

### **Implications and interventions**

Listening to young people's stories is not just significant for the role that it can play in expanding academic understandings, but in terms of the insights they can give us about grounded social process, useful interventions, and informed practice in the real world. By informed practice, I mean that we have explored the assumptions behind our practices, and that we know why we are doing what we are doing – ie. we are equipped to be intentional about what we do. This can have real impacts on kids' lives.

A prominent towns-person explained recently how a large food-processing factory has had to move north in The Valley because it could not find reliable workers down south. Criticisms are levelled at kids within 'The Valley' just as they are at wider population. When young people remain unemployed, and when job vacancies remain unfilled, local explanations mirror popular culture: 'They don't want a job.', '... lazy.', '... useless.'. These are also very 'thin' stories about what is happening in this situation. This research suggests that there might be a lot more going on than meets the eye. Assumed opportunities may not be accessible in other ways.

The challenge is to develop better understandings of people's resources-at-hand, to hear and tell thick stories of these. Understanding these things moves focus from the assumed pathologies or problems of certain groups and individuals, and looks instead at what people are using and able to access, to resource flows and how these can best happen. It puts listening on the agenda well before the posing of solutions. It positions the practitioner as learner. The upshot of these things is that the imperative question shifts from 'what is wrong with you?' to '*how can we best resource you?*'

Understanding an individual's or group's social practice means understanding what resources (practical, symbolic and/or cultural) they are actually working with. This means taking stock of 'resources-at-hand' *with* them. For example, what frames, themes (biographical and shared), stocks of knowledge, significant schema, language, (and so on) are being accessed by these people? What are the implications of these? How are they resourcing practice? Other direct implications for method must follow - ie. listening, time-investments and trust relationships are essential. These things are important for understanding key issues of young people's social participation in a time of big change, significant marginalization, and social exclusion.

This research allowed me to hear these young people's voices and to consider their resistances, for example, to continuing school beyond The Valley. These things have real-world implications for them, in terms of life-chances. In order to work well with young people, we need to think about how they come to know their worlds – their knowledge horizons and how they are bordered, the things that are relevant, the things that are meaningful. For example, in a very real sense some do not understand what is being offered to them in education. In another very real sense, we will not understand either, unless we listen to them. As shown in chapter 7, some respondents, (particularly 'settling' working-class males) have very concrete ways of making sense of with the world around them, whilst the world beyond their lived experience increasingly requires functioning at levels of abstraction. Education, then, would have to involve starting where they are at, and creating links between known worlds and worlds that they might actually need to know about. Although local teachers have managed to do this in stunning ways (eg. boat-building to learn maths, school farm to learn science), young rural people like these ones get lost when they



enter larger systems in bigger places (eg. grade 11 and 12 in Hobart). The challenge is about finding ways to stock-take resources-at-hand with them and start with their passions at that level.

I believe that there is also great significance in researching these issues well, and documenting the stories of those whose voices may not often be heard at a policy level. I have discovered that within our seemingly impenetrable systems, there are policy makers who do want to hear these stories.

The research has also given some grounded insights into the nature of social inequality. Respondents' stories have been filled with personal topics (stories about friends, extended family, memories and dreams) which at face-value have little to do with resource issues. Rather, as individuals communicated about these things, they also shared accurate, very grounded details about the processes by which they could access social, symbolic, and cultural goods. A long list of trusted others (individuals, groups and /or institutions) could be read effectively as a catalogue of resources available. Few trusted others means few available resources. Respondents' stories demonstrated how social structure is made of these relationships, with individuals differently able to draw upon the resources of not only their immediate networks, but also their network's networks.

Trust relationships themselves are functioning as resource bases, foundational to the life-chances of individuals. This idea has already been well covered in a literature on 'social capital' (eg. see Cox 1995; Putnam ; Fukuyama 1995; Etzioni 1993). More recently in Australia, the concept of social capital seems to have been caught-up in political rhetoric and lost its grounding. The idea has been used to serve political agendas, where it becomes the rationale for demanding that communities and families learn to look after each other again and solve their own problems.

The idea needs to be re-grounded and put to work differently. As we have seen in this study, communities and families can only share from the resources that they can access themselves. In a time of rapid social change and amidst a political climate of economic rationalism, resources are very depleted in some sections of the community. As this thesis shows, when individuals' networks, and their networks' own networks' resources have been stretched, exhausted or are being removed, the

results can be particularly devastating. Respondents' stories continually highlighted the significance of the ways that we as a society resource our families and our rural communities.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of *stable* community resources and long-term nurtured networks. At particular times of change and crisis (eg. leaving grade 10) we saw all respondents drawing only upon their allies – that is, the relationships that they *already* trusted. We can give kids all the information and opportunities in the world, but without trust relationships based upon (individual and group) history, they would be unable to make use of them.

As well as issuing challenges, grounded research like this also taps into possibilities. Young people's stories demonstrate the magnitude of the problems they face (eg. problems accessing significant resources like work, family support, stories about their lives that make sense), but within our conversations, respondents are also elaborating 'methodologies of hope'. Respondents' stories draw our attention to the ordinary, simple transactions which often do not make a big difference to young people and their lives, but which sometimes do. We see dramatic changes when an abused and frightened young woman is befriended by someone who helps her to tell stories about her past and dream possibilities for her future. We see turning points when a family-friend introduces a kid with few resources to his sailing networks, and the kid becomes a world traveller in his mind and a sailing champion in real life. We see the world begin to open up for a group of school-leavers who, coached by their teachers from childhood, enter the outside world and face college together. In short, methodologies of hope are about forging relationships of trust.

In terms of useful social practice - these young people's stories alert us towards the relevance of interventions at several different levels:

- In working with individual young people who are struggling, we need to be hearing and thickening stories, building and facilitating networks of trust where new repertoires of resources (practical, symbolic and habit) can flow;
- In work with communities, the task is about building networks of trust, facilitating flows of resources, within communities and with the outside world;

- In the political arena: Clearly we need to focus on building, maintaining and protecting the resources that belong to families and communities. Other writing (eg. Wyn and White 1997) suggests this is not just relevant to rural communities, but disadvantaged or marginalized communities, and increasingly to all Australian communities.

If, as a community, we are interested in young people, issues of life-chances and of equitable access to resources, focussing on *any* of these levels to the exclusion of the others becomes problematic.

### **Concluding remarks**

For me, the biggest surprises in the whole project have involved how often the research process came to be an embodiment of the issues being studied. Themes of power and efficacy in negotiations, engagement and meaning, storying and making sense, different resources, resource flows, trust and mistrust were all graphically lived-out in the relationships between researcher and respondents. The research process has clearly embodied some empowering social processes but at other times also the disempowering and ugly sides as well. This leaves unresolved issues for further thought.

Feminist and action researchers have drawn attention to the fact that all too often, social research processes replicate other oppressive social patterns (eg. see Bowes 1996). They and other researchers (eg. see Hood et al. 1999) are seeking to conduct research in ways that challenge patterns of oppression.

As noted by other researchers, young people can often share richly of themselves in research for very little direct return (Ram 1995; White et al. 1996). In this study, when respondents were able to engage, it seems the research process is one that directly resourced them:

Kylie: Can you come back again in 2 years and interview me again?

AW: But I will have finished in 2 years.

Kylie: That doesn't matter! Come back and interview me anyway!

(Kylie, after interview 3)

Initially I was surprised at how some kids warmed to being interviewed - eg. *them* being the first to say: 'Thankyou!' afterwards. Some say it was a chance to think out loud:

AW: It makes me realise how little you might get to talk about what you're thinking.

Alex: Yeah, this is a good chance to get stuff off our chest. I don't get excited when you're coming, but it's like 'Oh yeah, she's coming!'. (Alex 3:1)

and a forum where their voice could be heard:

Really good that you're doing all this 'cos I think it's good that you ask what we think. We get to say what we think. (Joel 3:19)

Interviews were claimed as a surprisingly rare safe and available space for storying, even amongst kids who had very good home relationships:

Joel: I never talk to my parents about my problems and that.

AW: Is that through experience?

Joel: No, I just never have. I just don't think they're the right people for that.

AW: Why not the right people?

Joel: I don't know I just don't think they are the right people. I don't talk to Dad about my problems and that, and if I tell Mum she'll tell Auntie Fay, and if I tell Auntie Fay, I used to talk to Auntie Fay but she tells Mum and then Mum goes spare at me...  
(Joel 3:30)

Ironically, even as a researcher who would publish what they said, kids welcomed talking to an outsider who was external to what they saw as small-town-gossip. Perhaps to be an outsider also meant being naïve, and this meant their freedom to test a voice outside collective or all-too-familiar stories.

Sadly, (and with some very notable exceptions), it was usually the young people who already came to this research process more equipped, who seemed in turn to be best resourced by the process. Rebekah is fully engaged: 'I've made a list...' (3:1) and using the interviews as forum for self-development. She already has the habits and symbolic tools in place to do that.

When individuals are not able to engage with a particular other (individual, group or institution), those social encounters become a hassle (see chapter 6). This applies to research and to sympathetic researchers as much as it does to school and sympathetic teachers. This may have been what led to the four withdrawals from this study. With every respondent though, it became a challenge to frame interviews to be both as meaningful and as accessible as they could be.

However, questions like: 'What are you doing and why?'; 'What do you really want to do next?'; 'How did you get here?'; and 'What would you like to see when you are 60 and look back on your life?' are *big questions*.

What do big questions do to the way we think? For a time, if we allow them, they can jar us out of what Schutz (1944) calls 'thinking as usual' where things taken-for-granted remain unquestioned. Individuals can shift into a state where assumptions and normal things are examined differently. Then the big questions get bracketed as the world of everyday life takes over again. But as chapter 8 would teach us, once the questions have been asked (exposure) and thought about (engaged with), they are *there* for the revisiting.

Engaging with the big questions is potentially very useful. On the other hand, what we did was actually 'tough ask' for *all* respondents. As Pete (one of the most articulate respondents) glibly said:

Umm, not really. I haven't thought much about the future, it's like... I think about what I'm going to tomorrow, pretty much. (Pete 2, 2555:2565)

As explained in chapter 7, to answer questions like: 'What's changed?' and 'What surprises you?' in re-interviews actually compounds cultural differences further,

making a fascinating picture of the different cultural resources and practices that respondents bring. However, it also becomes a tougher assignment for some than for others. Before we had spent some time on their new stories, first responses range from: 'This is what I've learned...; to 'I haven't thought about it'; 'I don't know'; and 'I was stupid'. This leaves plenty of challenges and food for further thought. There is a fine line between researching different cultural practices and running conversational experiments on people, between awakening consciousness and, on the other hand, making young people who are already being disempowered wrong yet again.

Then there are other issues involving the research 'gaze' and surveillance. Often, being an outsider who is interested in someone's life is welcomed. I remember finding a young man's home and in our first conversation, his mum, stressed-out with said son, says: 'Are you a social worker?' I hurriedly replied that I was not, expecting to see the door if I was. 'Too bad,' she said 'I could use some help right now'. Her son was not home yet and we had a cuppa anyway. Some people welcome the chance to talk over their live issues with an outsider, (even a fully confessed researcher!) to story it and so doing, to make sense of it for themselves.

Some thrive or grow within the experience of being researched, being reflected and reflexive: 'Oh we [the class of 97] will have to have a re-union and ring you up and invite you!' (Sonia 3:9); 'Gosh how could one person write so much about me!' (Suzy 3:9); 'Play the tape again, can y' play the tape again...' (Simon, after interview 3). I was reminded of the power of being socially acknowledged / heard / reflected (ie. Cooley's 1983 'looking-glass self') and how simply listening to young people powerfully does this, contradicting other dominant social patterns:

AW: You all talked out?

Kylie: No I could talk all day if you wanted me to.

AW: You also say that you get sick of talking...

Kylie: Yes, but you're listening so I could talk forever. (Kylie, 3, 15)

Everything in the thesis highlights the importance of a trusted audience for every story that is authored, the role of conversation in reflection, and the value of providing a safe space for young people to story their lives. But while during this

research some respondents found this to be a very creative process, others did not want to go there. Where embraced by some, it was resisted by others. 'Not that I really wanted to be reminded...' (Fieldnotes, April 1999). Worse still, at least once, I become part of the siege dynamics:

I um, when I first saw Lisa down at the shop yesterday I said: 'Lisa, I wanted to ring you!', and she says: 'What about?' and so on, and she said: 'What for, interview me what for?', with a sense of Oh God, aggravation or something, um and I said, don't worry it's only for my research, I'm not a secret agent for anybody or whatever, and she laughed but she laughed in a way that says *these people get asked too many questions by too many people who have too much power over them, all the time*. (Taped researcher journal, April 1999)

As a researcher, when I am not trusted I become part of that surveillance, add to it, accentuate it. I need to be aware of that.

... and I get the sense that when I went up to interview Lisa yesterday, I, I, I was again part of that surveillance machinery. She didn't say 'no' when I asked her but she negotiates with that, by saying 'yes', and organizing a time, and not being there [home] at that time - speeding up the driveway in that powerful charging thing [car] - I get the feeling that she would have grabbed the kid out of the car and ran into the house. Um [later] when I got back there, um, I had to walk around the place a couple of times before I realized that she was actually there - recognized the car - so I'd been staking out the house effectively - I knocked on both doors, and on my second circumnavigation around the house I was looking down The Valley, turned around and suddenly saw her stand back from the window - and said: 'Lisa!' just as I saw this white t-shirt disappear from my peripheral vision, no sound. [I remember feeling the hair on the back of my neck stand up - realizing the awfulness of the situation - here she is, noiselessly watching me watching her.] So I very obviously walked down the middle of the driveway and down the road - where she could see me - I'm not here any more, I'm not bugging you any more. (Taped researcher journal, April 1999)

As explained earlier, four out of 32 respondents said or demonstrated that they would no longer be involved in the research. It seems that even though they had each done interviews in the past, a one-on-one encounter was too big an 'ask'. With clear hindsight, I could have differently approached conversations with the four young women who withdrew from the study. In 1997 they could have been presented with an option to be interviewed together. Although they would produce qualitatively different kinds of results, joint interviews may have given a voice to those who might otherwise be silent. They would have changed power dynamics and provided a less fearsome interview space for cultures of people who story in more collective ways. In their previous interviews (1995), three out of these four chose to be interviewed with a friend present. Earlier chapters have revealed how for some, collective practice is a far more familiar and safe way of engaging with the world and with new things. What could their collective voices have explained?

When already socially voiceless kids also become voiceless in this research, what does this mean about the efficacy of the research? About the ethics? About the politics? Refusal is valuable data about social process and about difference, but it is also reinforcing existing social patterns. It becomes a powerful exemplar of social process (eg. trust and resource flows, meaning and engagement) but also a ghastly perpetuation of familiar dynamics.

To become privy to these young people's stories (if possible) may mean working longer and harder on trust relationships. To what end? To write about them and leave?

When respondents opt-out of research, hassling them is not an option and working around them is also a poor solution. Ignoring that they were there in the first place is even worse - as if to obliterate their presence or their impact on this study. Using external sources of information (eg. most of these are young women are from violent homes) means talking *about* them. Using a spokesperson is a possibility. For example, Beth found her way out of a violent home and crisis and was able to name what had been happening for her, and then stayed involved in the study. To merge her stories with some of the others is to make some assumptions but it is the best information that we have. Every preceding chapter shows these tensions: giving



space to the young women who negotiated without words, but keeping and respecting their silence. I have hoped at very least to amplify the silence to the point where it can not be ignored.

I have no doubts that this research was, is, and will continue to be valuable, and my research goals have been met. These kids are still teaching me as I write. However the process has also raised some questions (above) that have not been satisfactorily answered. Still the most privileged (plus several notable others) are also the ones who say most clearly that they benefited from this process. Is this realistically the best that I could hope for? Perhaps so. Simply because doing research is about engaging with the real world, rather than idealizing from the ivory tower, perhaps researchers like me have to take the 'bad' and the 'ugly' with the 'good'? However the challenge stands: how to better construct research so that it less embodies some of the most unhealthy social processes being studied? Rather, how can a researcher engage in work that more consistently confronts and challenges these patterns? Clearly, there is room for more work.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Going mental in cars**

(from interview in 1999 - Brett 3)

When there is little meaning to be found in work, little sense of identity being affirmed in routine activity, and little challenge in day-to-day life, respondents can be quite creative. Moonlight negotiations make for meaningful encounters in a private game that not many of the towns-folk understand. For Brett 'going mental in cars' incorporates both the best and worst aspects of living in Geeveston into meaningful events, sources of identity, significant ritual, game and story.

AW: Best bits? [about Geeveston]

Brett: Friends, yeah friends.

AW: Worst bits?

Brett: Lack of things to do. That's why we go mental in cars (laughs).  
Got to do something stir the cops up.

AW: Yeah I've been hearing this - is it sort of a local sport?

Brett: Yeah.

'Going mental in cars' with any kind of finesse involves a certain level of expertise and local knowledge. 'Successful' events are situated accomplishments - and they are defined by the act of stirring up targeted others. Successful events also become story - sources of identity - evidence of competency and ways of demonstrating expertise:

AW: So how do you do it?

Brett: 'Uonville Monday night - there wasn't a cop on road - past 'is  
'ouse - We started at Purity [Woolworths] car park, over 'uonville  
bridge - stop dragging - by the time we got back to the  
roundabout he was out. Takes that long - e's up.

Success is measured by the act of 'stirring up', an affirmation of 'I was here', of power in a context of acutely-felt personal powerlessness. Getting the local policeman out of his house in the middle of the night, and getting other locals engaged in the game are celebrated achievements.

AW: Why there [Huonville], not here [Geeveston]?

Brett: More people about up there, more cars -

AW: More competition?

Brett: No we don't drag much - 's only every now and again - people we're sure that we can beat - nah - sort of just mucking around.

Rather, 'stirring up' has its specified targets, and for Brett there is an etiquette which marks out the correct time and place:

Wouldn't drag if there was people everywhere or if there was lots of cops about but there was sort of only 3 cars there - and when we dragged there was no-one. Can cruise around up there - I done it other night - friend's birthday party - went up the bottle shop up there - 'ad mum in the car - said: 'You watch this.'. Drove up past Mitre 10 car park - though to Purity, come back down, up past mitre 10 car park - through to Purity, come back down - done that 3 times, and then they start following you - people from 'Uonville start following - and then on the corners you start giving it a bit, and making it sort of slide, and then on the corners - and they start followin' you agin'. And there's been friends chased out of 'Uonville - stir the local boys up.

Like in any other game, there are beliefs, habits, tactics and informal rules that need expounding, debating, and embellishing:

Brett: If you're from Huonville you don't go near Cygnet.

AW: Why?

Brett: Shotgun on you - been like it for years. But if you're from Geeveston you can go there. Huonville don't like Geeveston much - actually - Dover / Cygnet no worries. Geeveston go to Cygnet - bit iffy. But Huonville go to Cygnet - make sure you wear a bulletproof vest.

The tactical nature of the game provides a chance to theorize on the rules of the sport, to find patterns in social life, to create meaning with resources-at-hand. At the core of this activity is both the urge and the ability to create a story:

AW: You don't go there [Cygnet]?

Brett: Go every now and then - only to stir up Ferals.

AW: How do you stir up Ferals?

Brett: Different ways. Judbury, go up there - 'shoot Ferals' painted across the back window of a car - see all these combi-vans coming after you - don't worry - get back to Huonville everybody else comes out - mates and that.

The stories are told as if about a hunting sport, and there are elements of coaxing out the wildlife. Single incidents are told, retold, expounded, debated, and magnified:

AW: Shoot Ferals?

Brett: It's just a sticker you can buy - did it in flour and water, on a tinted window - gee it looked good - only done that once - never been game to go back again.

Something done once becomes a central part of the shared folklore down here - to be told and re-told richly.

AW: Who's engaged in this sport? Many people?

Brett: Nah just a few of the younger ones - oldest 25 - don't know a lot of them

AW: So how many car loads of you lot from down here?

Brett: Huonville - 3-4 in car - few from Dover - (thinks) prob'ly half a dozen carloads of a weekend go up.

AW: Boys? Girls?

Brett: Sometimes mixed sometimes separate - depends how much they've had to drink.

There seems to be a small number actually involved, but this distinctive activity shapes the social climate for many others. The moonlight activities are also storied very differently by these people.

## **Appendix B: Themes for focussed interviews**

**1: Future:** How think about it?

**2: Desired destinations**

- Education
- Occupation
- Social
- Family
- Travel

**3: Contingency plans**

**4: Social and geographical worlds**

- Opportunities (what will help to reach destinations)
- Constraints (what might get in the way)
- Dreams

**5: Identity**

- Why these dreams and plans
- When did they arise
- Meanings (of work, of relationships, of the things that are important)
- Understanding of chances of success in chosen tasks
- Locus of control
- Lifestyle and roles

**6. Social processes – the primary:**

- Significant others (talks to, interacts with)
- Reference groups (compares to)
- Role models (would like to be like)

## **7. Sources**

- Family
- Peers
- Teachers
- Community
- Broader networks
- Role of TV in life

This theme list was the starting-point for the 1995 interviews. Later interviews tended to revisit themes that had become prominent in earlier interviews, and also to explore the implications of the different cultural orientations towards these things. The later interviews also focussed much more attention on questions of what happened, why, how, and what comes next.



## Appendix C: Codes, or patterns in the data

The list that follows includes all the codes that emerged from data analysis in 'Atlas' (computer software specifically designed for qualitative analysis of texts). When finding patterns in the data, codes about what respondents were 'doing' were the most prolific (see all highlighted areas in the list). Verb categories captured the clearest and most profound patterns in the data. Over and over, this study suggests that class and gender are best understood not as categories of people, but as daily negotiations, things 'done' in social practice.

- context - crisis
- context - + ive feedback
- context - being a champion
- context - college
- context - compo
- context - exposure to geography / context - exposure to geography (not)
- context - exposure to idea
- context - exposure to issue
- context - exposure to people
- context - family - practical help no words
- context - family - role of brothers
- context - family - role of cousins
- context - family - role of father
- context - family - role of grandparents
- context - family - role of me
- context - family - role of mother
- context - family - role of parents
- context - family - role of sisters
- context - family - role of uncles and aunts
- context - family friends
- context - family practical help +words
- context - family practices
- context - family story
- context - family support
- context - friends, examples of intimacy
- context - friends, role of
- context - industry downturn
- context - lived here all my life
- context - lived here all my life (not)
- context - mentor
- context - mentor (not?)
- context - painful experience
- context - parent's own crisis
- context - parental deliberateness

- context - people like me
- context - role of boyfriends
- context - role of friends
- context - the role of traditions
- context - tv
- context - tv habits
- doing a concrete
- doing a moral imperative
- doing abstract question problem
- doing abstraction
- doing achievement 'how we did it'
- doing always look on the bright side
- doing anal. of other's character, unsolic.
- doing analysis - nearly
- doing analysis (not)
- doing analysis of interaction patterns
- doing analysis of mentor's story
- doing analysis of relationship - not
- doing analysis of relationship - unsolic.
- doing analysis of what works
- doing answers abstr. quest. with example
- doing answers question eventually
- doing answers the question (not)
- doing anticipating complications
- doing aspirations very specific
- doing aware of other's response to me
- doing awareness of other's need
- doing bloke ritual
- doing bored
- doing boyfriend, raised, unsolicited
- doing changing story
- doing choice between several good options
- doing choice by default
- doing clarifications
- doing comfortable with interview conditions
- doing contentment
- doing contrast between self & other
- doing could change me mind
- doing curiosity
- doing decision point in response to issue
- doing details the specifics for me
- doing dynamic plan
- doing embracing the new
- doing ethics
- doing example, unsolicited
- doing family - defending parents
- doing family as means to goal
- doing family responsibility
- doing family roles

- doing family, raised, unsolicited
- doing fear - evidence of covert
- doing fear, talks about it
- doing focus
- doing friends, raised, unsolicited
- doing Geeveston wowser
- doing history, unsolicited
- doing history, drawing on
- doing I can do
- doing I did - achievement
- doing identification
- doing implications - hasn't thought through
- doing implications - wrestling with
- doing inaccuracy
- doing language - few words
- doing language re choice
- doing language re organization
- doing laughing at own mistakes
- doing mannerism - don't know.
- doing mannerism - I don't know.
- doing mannerism - I 'spose
- doing mannerism - I think
- doing mannerism - Yeah, that's what it's about,
- doing mannerism - you know what I mean
- doing mannerism haven't gave it much thought.
- doing masculinities
- doing means (hard things) to ends
- doing means to (not) ends, vague
- doing means to ends, accurate but unlikely
- doing means to ends, fulfilled
- doing means to ends, inaccurate
- doing means to ends, progress
- doing means to ends, realistic
- doing means to ends, specifically only
- doing means to ends, unsolicited
- doing means to ends, vague
- doing media analysis
- doing memory (not)
- doing mentor, raised, unsolicited
- doing new direction for interview
- doing not answering the question
- doing outlines the setting for me
- doing outlines what you gotta do for me
- doing outlining options
- doing plans
- doing plans for later
- doing plans for summer
- doing plans, contingency
- doing plans, not

- doing power in our conversation
- doing pride?
- doing priorities - clear
- doing quest
- doing reason for plan, solicited
- doing reason for plans, unsolicited
- doing research
- doing research - not
- doing research, holding off
- doing role models
- doing seeking consensus
- doing self-analysis
- doing self-analysis (not)
- doing self-awareness
- doing self-awareness (not)
- doing self-talk
- doing self-taught man
- doing self in other's shoes
- doing significance of my role
- doing social analysis
- doing social justice
- doing speculating about the unknown
- doing stocktaking of resources
- doing story (piecemeal)
- doing storytelling
- doing storytelling - unsolicited, generous detail
- doing storytelling - seeking information
- doing storytelling - volunteering information
- doing storytelling (not)
- doing storytelling together
- doing strategy
- doing systems awareness
- doing systems awareness, not
- doing systems awareness, specific
- doing the big picture
- doing theorizing purpose
- doing theory (not) now contradicts self
- doing theory + application
- doing theory elaborated easily
- doing theory, declines
- doing theory, solicited
- doing theory, unsolicited
- doing tropes
- doing watching sister
- doing we - colleagues
- doing we - extended family
- doing we - friends
- doing we - Geeveston
- doing we - me and family friend

- doing we - me and my mate
- doing we - nuclear family
- doing we - school
- doing we - school class
- doing we - Tassie?
- doing we - the young ones
- doing we (not) - family
- doing who's speaking please
- doing work ethic
- method - ask them about this!
- method - definition problems
- method - families engage differently with me
- method - frame interview differently
- method - I should have picked up on this
- method - kids engage differently with me
- method - need to ground the question
- method - the vague question
- process - all hands on deck
- process - active, dynamic decisions
- process - confidence
- process - different planning patterns
- process - different social worlds
- process - Discovering things
- process - feedback from trusted other
- process - growing leadership
- process - growing skills
- process - how aspirations are formed
- process - how blokes get jobs in G
- process - how decisions are made
- process - how ideas are accessed
- process - how ideas are recalled
- process - how parents teach kids
- process - how we learn
- process - just like me - how coaching works
- process - negotiations
- process - networks as credentials
- process - people strategy
- process - principle driven planning
- process - reality check
- process - sense of agency
- process - sense of wellbeing
- process - serendipity
- process - settling
- process - taste
- process - the coherent story of me
- re aspirations - geography
- re aspirations - having a family
- re aspirations - history of
- re aspirations - impossible dream

- re aspirations - marriage
- re aspirations - partners in crime
- re aspirations - realistic
- re aspirations - travel
- re aspirations - work experience
- re aspirations for later
- re aspirations job
- re aspirations job - exposure to idea
- re aspirations job - previous experience
- re aspirations, reason for
- re boyfriends
- re career
- re change - turning point
- re changes in general
- re college
- re college - left Geeveston
- re college - potential living arrangements
- re college - travelling up
- re education - home schooling
- re education - schoolwork
- re education - uni
- re education , meaning of
- re education plans
- re education, uni, living arrangements
- re education, yr 11 at Geeveston
- re family
- re fears
- re friends
- re friends (not)
- re future
- re G - so they had to be friends with them
- re Geeveston
- re Geeveston - finishing school
- re Geeveston - Such a peaceful place.
- re Geeveston - thoughts about leaving
- re Geeveston school - happy memories
- re hobbies
- re ideals - a good life?
- re ideals, marriage
- re ideals, own family
- re issue - access to shops
- re issue - being big
- re issue - being versatile and employable
- re issue - buying a house
- re issue - change
- re issue - communication
- re issue - control
- re issue - critical mass
- re issue - dangerous jobs

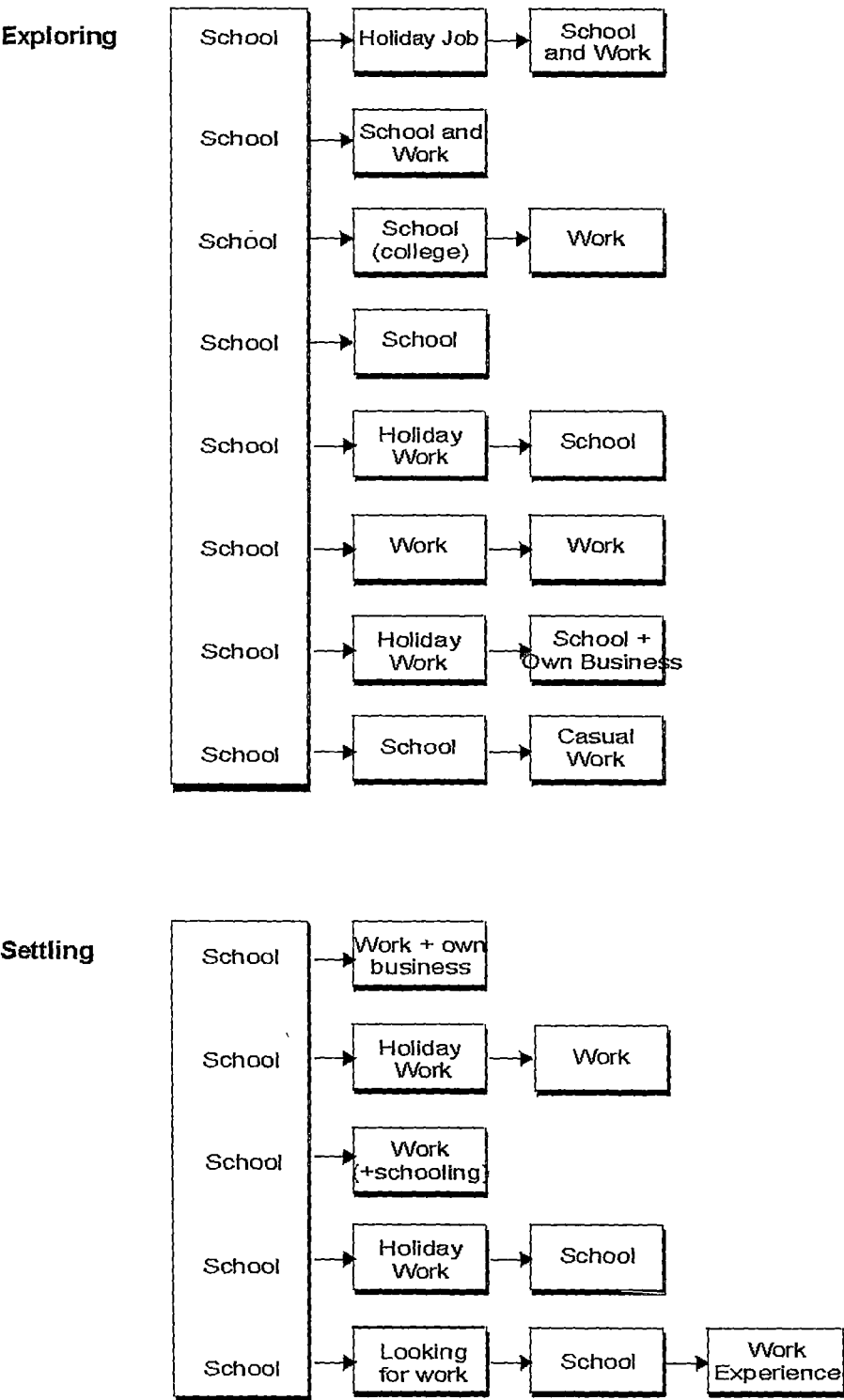
- re issue - divorce
- re issue - everyone knows every little thing
- re issue - finding my roots
- re issue - fitting in
- re issue - friends
- re issue - getting away from it all
- re issue - I have to know what's going on
- re issue - if you do nothing, getting bored
- re issue - isolation and transport
- re issue - it wont be too hard finding work
- re issue - learning
- re issue - life
- re issue - liking people at work
- re issue - living in the city
- re issue - meeting new people
- re issue - memory
- re issue - moving around
- re issue - not enough time
- re issue - pay is good
- re issue - pay is lousy
- re issue - power in decision making
- re issue - re-creating the good times
- re issue - relationship with father
- re issue - rural decline
- re issue - scenery
- re issue - sibling comparison
- re issue - staying close to family
- re issue - such a big place
- re issue - support from family
- re issue - sustainable lifestyle
- re issue - the importance of anchors
- re issue - tired of school
- re issue - tiredness
- re issue - tradition
- re issue - work
- re issue - vocation
- re issue - think maybe I can
- re issue - young women reflect on the double shift
- re job - good job
- re mass media - books
- re mass media, movies
- re mass media, tv
- re mentors - the importance of
- re moving out of home
- re my aunt says
- re my doctor says
- re my everyone says
- re my friend says
- re my friends say

- re my mum said
- re my neighbours say
- re my parents say
- re my sister says
- re my teacher says
- re next year
- re passion
- re passion - what's in it for me
- re passion (not)
- re relatives - blokes
- re role models
- re rules and resources
- re self- reality check
- re self - 'won't change'
- re self - attributes of
- re self - haven't changed
- re self - how I think about it
- re self - how others respond
- re self - I'll still be me
- re self - I always thought
- re self - I get really angry when
- re self - I'm always
- re self - its been with me all my life
- re self - project
- re self - shocked myself
- re self - what I do
- re self - what I don't do
- re self - what I hate
- re self - what I like
- re self - what i think
- re self concept
- re self limitations
- re sport
- re stories - the role of
- re things to do before 100
- re travel
- re we always
- re what's important
- story - Ahh, I want to do
- story - all my family are here
- story - But everything's calmed down now
- story - cause I've gone through a lot
- story - doesn't happen at our house.
- story - down at the shack
- story - getting wood
- story - grown up on a farm
- story - I've only just started being like this
- story - I didn't want to do anything.
- story - i probably might one day



- story - It's not as hard as work any more
- story - it's quite strange to see us all leave
- story - it kind of helps put more roots in
- story - Mr P and mainly him
- story - pig
- story - so I'd like to be able to do the same back
- story - So, you never know what comes up.
- story - the class of 97
- story - There's not much to do around here.
- story - they'll always need cars to be fixed
- story - they got their own house now
- story - we have this thing in our house
- story - we work and others don't
- story - yeah I did I learned so much

**Appendix D: Flow-chart of trajectories**



**Appendix D: Flow-chart of trajectories (cont.)**

